

Driven before the Storm
by Gertrude Forde





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DRIVEN BEFORE THE STORM.

VOL. III.



DRIVEN BEFORE THE STORM

BY

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“A LADY’S TOUR IN CORSICA,” “IN THE OLD PALAZZO,”
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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DRIVEN BEFORE THE STORM.

CHAPTER I.

A CONVICT IN PORTLAND.

‘ This is truth the poet sings,
That a sorrow’s crown of sorrow is remembering happy
things.’—TENNYSON.

FIVE months ago ! What a short time is five months, when days are placidly monotonous and existence drifts by easily ! what a lifetime it can appear when the memory is charged with varying and painful events, when existence has been forcibly wrenched out of its accustomed grooves, and when each day brings with

it new experiences of a sharp and cruel nature! To Barrington De Witt, now a penal convict in Portland prison, it seemed almost as if his own old self were dead, and as if the present self were a new creation unconnected with the former man. It seemed to him, on looking back, as if the real self had died out in the Tentbury prison; as if the real self of the old profession, the old name, the old nature, had been merely a pleasant and fanciful dream. Prepared as he had been for execution, and all hope relinquished, he had, as it were, passed through the full bitterness of death; and when they came to announce to him the reprieve on that—as he had believed—last night of his life, the news had come too late to spare him the deepest dregs of the cup of shame and agony. He heard of the reprieve

without emotion, as he would have ascended the scaffold next morning without dismay; the powers of darkness had been battled with, and the struggle was now over, and he listened as one in a dream, apathetic and unmoved.

They had thought him insensible, hardened, what not—it mattered not to him. He was now only a goods, a slave, a machine, to be sent about from place to place, and worked at the nation's will. He was now only a number on a list of criminals; no longer a name, a person, or an individuality. All resistance, all spirit had died out of him for the moment, and he moved about obediently, patiently, at the bidding of his jailers, unheeding their roughness, deaf to their coarse familiarity. In the shock of a new existence such as this, the existence simply of a degrading monotony

of mental inaction and physical toil, an educated man for a time is apt to lose the consciousness of his higher faculties, to forget that he has a spirit, a soul, or an intellect. The gentleman, the soldier, the *man*, Barrington told himself, was dead—merged in this labelled, animal *thing* which now, by so terrible a metempsychosis, was all that was left to represent its former self—a thing upon which he gazed with so deep and cruel a contempt, as upon something distinct and separate from that former self which he honoured and had lost.

These were feelings which endured for some time, and during their continuance brought with them a certain callousness to fate and apathy to surrounding circumstances which acted as an alleviation to pain: but they could not last for ever. There came a day, not many weeks later,

when the scales of apathy slipped from the prisoner's eyes, when he once more recognized within himself the man, the old self, not transformed, but merely transfigured, and owned himself a sentient being as of old, capable of emotion, of suffering, of despair. It is so with all of us—all those who have the capacity for sounding the depths of sorrow: there is, at first, after a great loss, a great shock, a moment of mental suspension, of semi-unconsciousness, before we wake to the full perception of the blow, the keen and bitter realization of our own overthrow. It is at this time ordinarily, and not at the first, that the spirit of endurance is apt to break down, and this period it is which, more than any other, proves the mettle of the individual man or woman.

About this time a batch of prisoners,

amongst whom was De Witt, was removed from the London jail to the convict establishment at Portland—that dreary pile that stands above the ever-moaning sea, and raises grim and massive walls from its foundation of limestone rock. To Barrington this removal was at once a solace and yet an added pain. All his life he had loved the sea, and many of his happiest days had been spent beside it; yet from that very cause, how bitter was the contrast of the present with the past! What merry hours he had passed wandering about the flat shores of Norfolk with old Simon, gun in hand, laughing at his cousin's skilful inability to hit anything winged or four-footed; how he had scoured the brown and purple Scotch moors with his father for the same purpose, slowly tracking the snipe or curlew by the soft

grey waves and luminous sky; or had loved to boat upon a boisterous sea when quartered with his regiment in Ireland. And then the shore at Naples, and Waif's appearance there; and—bitterest thought of all—Capri with her many-coloured rocks and malachite waters, her spires of foam and her mysterious caverns—Could he, the convict at Portland, daily going forth to his appointed task as a labourer, clad in the dress of disgrace, be the same man who had lain upon the myrtle-scented slopes in beautiful Capri, looking up into the face of a pure and lovely girl, the face of the woman he loved, and the woman who loved him?

The first time these thoughts came upon him De Witt involuntarily covered his eyes with his hand and shuddered. But a hand will not shut out memory, nor can any one turn aside the pitiless stab of the sword

it wields to those in misfortune—a sword piercing through to the very soul.

De Witt was young, and he was strong ; he displayed no aptitude for the lighter indoor employments, so he was placed in the gang of those apportioned off to the quarry work. It was the hardest work of all, but to him the most acceptable. At any rate there was the open sky, the fresh air ; they could not rob him of the blueness of the heavens, the sweet saltness of the sea breezes, the harmonious chanting of the rising and falling billows. In winter it might, nay, must be—amid the vicissitudes of a damp and chilly climate—laborious and painful toil ; but now, in this sunny, balmy autumn weather, it was not without its many alleviations. There could never be the same sense of imprisonment, never the same sense of contamination

with the low and depraved community of criminal units, nothing like the same monotony, as in the indoor life.

Was all the rest of life to be occupied in like toil ? Should he ever escape from the daily grind, and be once more free ? Or must the future stretch before him in a vista of hopelessness only to end in death ?

No ; it was possible that he might at some long future date make his way out from convict life, become a ticket-of-leave man, wander forth once more, if supervised and overlooked, at any rate ostensibly free to go where he liked, to do as he liked—yet for ever with the brand of Cain upon his brow.

But what mattered that if liberty were regained ? There were moments when De Witt felt that one day of freedom would be worth purchasing by all the good opinion

of his fellow-men. He felt himself now so completely divided from those fellow-men, so averse to the mere idea of ever again becoming one of them, sharing again in their pursuits, moving in their company, that it seemed at times as if their good or bad report had lost its savour with him. Without this faint, far-distant hope, Barrington felt he could scarcely have kept life or reason going.

There were opportunities by which a man engaged in the quarry work might put an end to an unendurable existence—a quick leap into the depths of the boiling sea, a fall from some height upon the pitiless rocks. A cowardly act no doubt it was—at least so said the prosperous and untempted; but to a desperate man, possibly the one escape from a life-long hell. Happy perhaps were the old Romans in accounting suicide a

noble and a manly thing; and severe was the faith of the Christian in condemning it as the deed of the coward. Was it fair to call a man a coward because he chose instant death rather than prolonged torture? And there rose up in his memory one of the letters of Pliny the younger—that sensible, kindly, worldly old Roman—a letter read years ago, in which he held up to eulogy the example of more than one suicide, praising the heroism and the lofty character of those who, sooner than live disgraced, or survive that which they held most dear upon earth, had taken life with their own hands. And was not loss of liberty, loss of honour, best of all motives for divesting a human being of the love of life?

It was easy, as I have said, to do—easy for a determined man—yet De Witt put the thought instinctively aside. He was no

ancient Roman, with a perverted morality and a false ideal of courage ; and he knew that in calmer moments his reason concurred in the verdict of Christian ethics ; and should he, who had lost all this world could give, lose also the one thing left to him—his own self-respect ?

And Nell—whose name, the very thought of whom sent so bitter a pang through his being, and yet whose love was the sweetest sadness of past memories—should he add another sting to her cruel sufferings, throw away the one chance of ever again setting eyes upon the human face he yearned most to see once more before he died ? Years and years it might be, it must be ; but he was young and strong, and the day might come—it was enough to live upon, a faint ray of hope to illumine the blackness of the daily despair. Not to love her, not to be hers again

—not even to touch her hand or to hear sweet words of comfort from her faithful lips—but to catch one more sight of that dear face, to look once more—himself unseen—into those true and tender eyes, to know that she was contented and had forgotten. Yes, pray God she might forget! Pray God that her wounded heart might in time be healed; even—he nerved himself in his great love to say—that she might knit up the broken strands of the sorrowful past in a new and more prosperous love. Pray God that she might some day find a man worthy of her noble nature, that she might re-set the foundations of her life under happier conditions; for never would he, whether he returned to the outer world in youth or age, recall to her the past, never would he voluntarily seek her presence save for that one brief glimpse—

never again hear from her or say to her words of love. Such conduct would indeed be the lowest depths of mean and selfish egotism ; and the greater a man's love and the more enduring a woman's constancy, the more impossible would it be to any honourable mind.

But although self-destruction seemed to De Witt a thing ignoble and repulsive, yet escape, if possible, he would have reckoned a fair and righteous act. His sentence was unjust, his punishment unmerited ; why should he not regain the liberty that had been unlawfully wrested from him, if by any means he might ? And, for the chance of that liberty he would gladly have risked death. Often he thought upon the matter, as his eyes wandered restlessly from the well-guarded labour-ground around him to the waves that chafed beneath his feet.

And the more he thought upon the subject, the more its utter hopelessness and impossibility struck him.

Would he cast himself into the sea and swim for his life? The guns of the armed warders would soon end that attempt. Would he escape by land? Even if he managed in that case to evade the vigilance of the watchmen, how should he vanquish the cruel impossibility of the Chesil Bank? He had visited the Chesil Bank in young and happy days—he had laboured laughing as a boy along the slope of stones, little thinking that the time would ever come when it would lie as the implacable barrier between himself and attempted liberty. Now, in stormy, gloomy days, he listened to the ceaseless moan that broke along its desolate shores, and realized with a strange bitterness its invulnerableness, its cruelty.

God help the poor drowning wretch, whose vessel struck upon that treacherous bank, and who strove with failing arms to grasp those sliding, slipping stones ! God have pity upon the still more wretched prisoner, whose exhausted feet strove to distance pursuit or to escape from captivity along that inhospitable and hopeless stretch of grey gravel, with floundering, wearying steps, and eyes of despair, before which it must seem to extend for ever further and further in its fearful monotony of glaring sunshine or of clinging mist !

Some there had been that had tried both ways ; but not one, so far as he could hear, with success. Some, to facilitate their escape, had committed murder ; it was so comparatively easy to do that in the quarry work—a loose stone, the opportune fall of a lump of granite or pickaxe could disable a

warder so quickly; but to such a crime as that De Witt had little temptation. Terrible as was his yearning at times for liberty,—a fever that ate, like the Spartan fox, into the very vitals of the man,—yet it never occurred to him to endeavour to regain his liberty by violence towards an unoffending person. Since that one outbreak of madness in the county prison, he had made no further effort to defy authority, and was now quiet and obedient above the average, and regarded with favour by his particular house warder. The habits and discipline of a soldier were not without their value during a time when the mind of the natural man was crushed by misfortune, and when the spirit was confronted by a stern necessity which rendered struggle futile.

One consolation there was, which helped

much to alleviate De Witt's trouble. This was one which had certainly not been within his expectations. He had found a friend.

Even within a convict prison all are not equally bad,—some are not bad at all ; and De Witt's friend, although by no means a guiltless man, was one worthy both of regard and of compassion. He was one of those victims of unlucky circumstances and of cruel temptation that so often take their place in the docks of our criminal courts. He had early told his history to De Witt, for whom he appeared to have conceived an affection at first sight, and whom he sought out for a few words of conversation whenever there was any chance of doing so without being noticed. This was a somewhat risky thing to do, for, as a general rule, whenever a warder observed any two prisoners endeavouring to set up anything

like an intimacy together, he thought it his first duty to divide them as much as possible.

Both De Witt, however, and his friend were prisoners so unobtrusive and so well-behaved, that more than one of the warders (who happened, strange to say in such a profession, to have some remnant of a kindly heart left undevoured by the brutalizing influence of his surroundings) winked at the trifling offence, which meant no harm to them or the State, but so much of comfort to the two men.

Geoffrey Rainsford was a young man—
younger than De Witt—whom even the dress and shears of a convict establishment could not rob of a singular beauty and refinement of countenance. His features were well-cut, his eyes magnificent, and his voice the sweetest, Barrington thought the first time he heard it, that had ever struck

upon his ear. He was peculiarly gentle in manner, and had that kind of delicacy of appearance that usually marks out the naturally consumptive person.

His story, as he told it his companion, was a sad and brief one. As a very young man he had been articled by his father, himself a lawyer, to a London firm of solicitors, but had never had much taste for the work, being mad upon the study of music, and possessed of a good tenor voice. In London he followed his favourite pursuit with much greater ardour than the law ; and at last, to his father's indignation, threw up the office altogether, and accepted an engagement in some subordinate part in an operetta then successfully running at one of the theatres. In this part he did so well and gave so much satisfaction, that the following season he was offered a far

better engagement, which he accepted ; and before long found himself making a good income, with an ambitious future before him.

Under these circumstances he settled down and married—married a girl with whom he had been in love ever since his arrival in London, and who made his home supremely happy. But the marriage, to which he vainly endeavoured to reconcile his parents, proved the final division between himself and them.

She was the sweetest and most refined of women, asserted poor Geoffrey ; but unfortunately she was the daughter of a shop-keeper, and herself a music mistress. His father considered it a *mésalliance* ; and from that date refused all further communication with the young man.

Notwithstanding this drawback, however, the young tenor in his new-made happiness

found no reason to regret the step he had taken, until an event happened as sudden as it was unforeseen and calamitous.

The part he had taken in the opera proved too great a strain upon him. A disease he had never suspected made its terrible appearance, and one night he was carried home from the theatre suffering from a violent hemorrhage of the lungs.

From that time forward the career he loved and in which he had prospered so greatly became closed to him.

When at length he recovered from a long and wearing illness, it was to hear the fiat of the doctor, that he must choose betwixt his singing and his life. Submission was the only course left open to him, and he thought himself fortunate in obtaining the post of clerk in a solicitor's firm, to whom he had been slightly known in former

legal days. But his long illness had exhausted all previous earnings, and his salary now was but a pittance compared with the income he had earned upon the stage.

Day by day the pressure of poverty grew harder, not only upon himself, but upon the young wife, whose necessity for ease and good fare was for the first time absolute; and who now for the first time since their marriage began to lose heart, and, as he feared, health daily. It was unendurable to him to see her round cheek growing daily more pinched, to hear her voice daily more languid, and to know that a continuance of poverty and privation might imperil the life both of herself and of the expected child. He it was who had brought her to this! Should he see her die for want of a few luxuries? So one day, when the opportunity occurred, the

temptation was unresisted. A sum of money—it was not much, fifteen pounds—paid in to the firm came in his way ; and, prompted by an evil spirit, he took it. The transaction would not, in the natural course of things, come under the notice of the partners until the monthly accounts were made up three weeks hence ; and before that time his wife's troubles would be over, and his own quarter's salary be paid, when he would refund the borrowed (?) sum, and no one be any the wiser or the worse for the act.

But when do things go in their natural course, if by any chance an unusual importance attaches itself to their doing so ? Not many days after Rainsford had abstracted the fifteen pounds some accidental trifle laid the whole matter before his employers, and he was brought face to face with the accusation of a felony. It

was in vain for him to plead his ardent temptation, his innocent intentions ; such excuses have been too often urged before in like circumstances to have much weight. The partners were stern and unrelenting men, who were the less inclined to clemency from the fact that it was the second time during the year that they had been robbed by one of their clerks. The first misdemeanant they had simply dismissed, but the second they prosecuted. And before the three weeks were over, Rainsford had been tried, found guilty, and sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

Whilst awaiting his trial his child had been born ; and now he had no hope of seeing wife or babe until the five long years were over. One consolation, however, had been his : both wife and child were living and doing well, and here and there a friend seemed

rising up to pity and assist the poor forlorn young mother, whose monthly letters—one of which the young man showed to De Witt, with the tears shining in his dark eyes—breathed the tenderest spirit of love and constancy to her imprisoned husband.

‘I shall never see her again,’ he remarked, a quiet sadness in his face and tone. ‘It seems a little out of proportion, does it not—the sentence of death in return for one imprudent action?—for theft I never meant it to be, God knows!’

‘Why the sentence of death?’ asked De Witt; ‘five years will soon be over.’

And, thinking of his own life-conviction, his brow grew gloomy.

‘Do you suppose,’ replied the other, ‘that such as I shall ever manage five years in this sort of existence? One will probably see me out. If I had your physique

now—’ And he gazed with a sweet, sad smile at Barrington’s athletic frame and firm-fleshed limbs. ‘I shouldn’t mind for myself so much ; it’s for her, my poor Florence—’

‘It’s a pity we can’t exchange constitutions,’ said De Witt with bitterness. ‘The only use of mine is to prolong my punishment, you see— But perhaps,’ he continued, ‘you will get off before—you will have some of your time remitted, you know, certainly—’

‘Before that time comes I shall be in another world,’ was the quiet response. ‘I shall never be free in this.’

‘You should ask to see the doctor. Such a man as you are manifestly unfit for this hard labour,’ remarked De Witt, who had often noticed the flush upon his companion’s cheek, and heard his panting breath.

‘I know it ; it is only a question of weeks

before it brings on a return of the hemorrhage. But what can I do? The open air is a necessity to me; I should die just as soon cooped up in-doors. And this is better while it lasts—here one can at least see something fair to look upon—one can at least have one's own thoughts to oneself.'

'You might go into the infirmary now,' said De Witt; 'you are not up to work—it is killing you.'

Rainsford shuddered.

'Anything sooner than that!' he said quickly. 'De Witt, *that* is the only thing I dread—a long illness in the infirmary. If only I might die out here beneath the sky! Sometimes *that* thought tempts me to fling myself over those rocks down there. If I pray for nothing else as I ought, I pray,—God forgive me,—as every convict *must*, for sudden death!'

CHAPTER II.

WHO IS THE MAN ?

‘Give sorrow words : the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o’erfraught heart, and bids it break.’

SHAKESPEARE.

NELL was still staying at the little house in West Kensington, when a letter arrived from Barrington, addressed to Sir Simon, and sent on by the latter to Judith. It was short and constrained in tone ; but, as Mr. Ponsonby had explained to them, it would have to be written under supervision—and who could expect a natural tone under these circumstances ?

‘Do not return it,’ wrote Sir Simon, with

delicate consideration, 'if either of you wish to keep it. There is no fear of my forgetting what the poor fellow says.'

Such as it was, however, it was something of a comfort to both Nell and Judith, if only because it was a link between them and him, lost as he was in that strange shut-in world which seemed to have no part in theirs.

'I have just been told that I may write, and as perhaps you may wish it, I will do so. You will be allowed to answer this if you do so at once. I do not know that I can tell you anything—you know my sentence. I am quite well. I should like to thank you and Ponsonby and all others who have worked for me and been kind to me—also Aunt Judith and the other. God bless and reward her for her words of comfort to me. Tell her this.

'BARRINGTON.'

That was all—truly a barren epistle to those who yearned with hearts of love and pity over the prisoner, yet a painful and difficult effort on his part, and to them—far better than nothing. To poor Nell it was an unspeakable consolation. He bade God bless her for her words—her little note had reached him, and been a help to him in his greatest hour of need ! He thought of her now, he loved her, he blessed her. The brief, sad letter was read and re-read through blinding tears, and then placed in her bosom. Never was letter more welcome than the one which, coming from that convict prison, was found worthy to rest near the heart of a young and virtuous and beautiful girl. There it should lie night and day to remind her of him, until they were reunited, if such joy ever were accomplished ; if not, until her death.

A week or two later there came a letter from Blanche Hopkins, now married and become Blanche Manton, in New York. The letter was like Blanche herself, true-hearted, impulsive, and loving. She was full of deepest indignation against De Witt's accusers, and tenderest compassion for her friend's trouble. The whole account of the trial, as also of the remission of the capital sentence, had found its way into one of the American papers, and been read by her. She expressed herself in no measured terms regarding the utter stupidity and culpability of those who could persuade themselves that such a man as De Witt could be guilty of a crime like murder; and her hot, full sympathy acted as a balm on Nell's outraged feelings, as her outspoken abuse of Mr. Brereton would have astonished that gentleman had he been made acquainted with it.

‘There is only one thing left for you to do, Nell,’ she concluded. ‘Keep your eyes open in every direction for the real criminal. If your step-brother was really murdered, then some one must have done it, and that some one must and shall be discovered. Any day the clue may be found, the mystery may be solved. Keep up your heart—you never know when this may happen. Never lose hope or activity in the matter—I don’t mean *talking* about it, but watching for some indication to put you on the right track. The police are so foolish all over the world, and more especially, they say, in England, that *their* opinion and their conclusions are not worth the least consideration. Oh, my poor darling Nell, how I wish I were with you—how I wish I could comfort you ! I have been crying all morning about you, and that poor dear

darling fellow, God bless him! I feel so frightfully mad about it all. But don't you give up hope. You and Barrington are both young. The real man may be tracked, or may confess. Anyhow, write and tell me *every* detail you can think of regarding the murder and all that went before and after it for some days. Tell me what friends and enemies your brother had, and if they found any queer letters written to him, after his death. Find out about this, and tell me if you suspect any one the least bit, and if Captain De Witt did. Who knows if I may not be as good as all your lawyers and Q.C.s? A woman's wit's worth something, I guess, especially if she comes from this side of the duck-pond.'

This letter Nell answered from the Cedars, whither she had returned soon after re-

ceiving it; and for a while she allowed it to buoy her up with a faint hopefulness that by degrees faded away again into the old despairing apathy, yet not so entirely as to banish from her memory the injunction of her friend.

But if the weight of trouble upon Nell's mind had been as much as she could bear whilst staying with her London friends, the burden was far worse at home. She had a brave and dutiful spirit, and she fought her battle day by day; yet the struggle was almost too much for her. Never for one moment was the thought out of her mind, never for one moment was the aching pain withdrawn from her spirit; and at times she felt as if she could no longer stand upright, but must lay down her weapons, and give herself up, body and soul, a prey to the sickly despair for ever

watching to destroy her. She was so weary, so torn by this ceaseless pain. If only she might have toiled and suffered in bodily effort for him ; but to be eternally thinking, thinking, thinking, dwelling on the cruel facts, on the happy past, and on the hopeless future, without change of idea or necessity for action—this was the deadliness of the thing, this it was that at times seemed as if it would vanquish her, would overthrow her reason or her faith, or, at any rate, her tottering self-control. And then—when she knew she could no longer fight or pray, when she said to herself, ‘What is the good—why should I live?’—then, as a last resource, the faint phantom of hope was called in, and bid to stand up and support her moral equilibrium.

‘He will yet come out of prison, the real murderer will yet be found, we shall

still meet again some day!’ And the poor stricken soul would turn and hug the phantom to its breast, and weep over it, and bless it, and be comforted once more.

And so the weeks and months passed on, and only one event came to break the sorrowful monotony of the girl’s life. This was her meeting one day with James Barrett. The under-keeper had returned from the neighbourhood of Tentbury, and was again at his father’s cottage. He was sitting on the stile, moodily reflecting, one bright summer’s evening, when Nell came suddenly upon him. The young man gave a start when he saw her, and touching his cap, began hastily to move away. It was the first time she had seen him since all the terrible events which had so changed the course of life for her; and it struck

her that his countenance wore a deeper gloom than it had used to do.

Moved by a sudden impulse, she called to him as he walked away.

‘Jim!’ she said; and the young fellow stood still and turned towards her.

‘Jim, I have never seen you since—Mr. Robert’s death.’

She spoke without hesitation, her eyes fixed upon his face.

‘No, miss,’ he replied, without change of countenance.

There was a pause; then she continued,—

‘They have condemned a man; but he was not the one who did it!’

James Barrett remained staring at her silently. Suddenly, however, his look shifted, and for a moment his colour changed, as she moved a step forward. There was a fierce glow in her eyes, a light

of passion, of repressed feeling such as the young gamekeeper had never encountered before from man, woman, or child, as she sought his and forced him to return her gaze.

‘Jim Barrett, do *you* know anything of Robert Brereton’s murderer?’

‘I know nothing, miss,’ he returned sullenly; ‘how should I?’

His manner seemed natural enough; had she any warrant for seeming to suspect him of so great a crime? Yet, as she turned away, she added one more word.

‘God only knows if you speak the truth,’ she said in concentrated tones; ‘and if my words wrong you, I ask your pardon, Jim. But if not, and you know anything of this and have kept it back, may He judge between you and the innocent at your last hour; for you will have murdered two

men, and the second crime more cruel than the first !’

Whilst she spoke he had remained motionless ; but so soon as the low stern voice ceased, and the flashing eyes were removed from his, he slouched away quickly. As he did so he passed his hand across his brow and shuddered. He seemed to feel his sight for a moment weakened by that blinding, burning gaze. Had she cursed him ? What had she said about his last hour ? What a fool he was to tremble at a woman’s words ! But he had never met any woman before whose looks, whose tone had been like this woman’s. And he slunk away like a threatened hound, more morose than ever.

And Nell went home trembling, yet feeling a momentary vigour from the encounter. Could it be that the young man

knew or guessed anything about Robert's death ? Had she not been cruel and unjust in showing him her suspicions—suspicions indeed which she knew had only been awakened in her during her daily broodings over the matter since De Witt's conviction ; and which, but for Blanche Hopkins's letter, she would probably never have ventured to put into words. She walked home slowly, her hand upon Waif's head. They often walked together thus, she and the dog, when Nell's trouble especially oppressed her. It seemed to give her some slight comfort to have beside her the faithful animal which Barrington had loved so well ; whilst Waif delighted to feel the touch of her fingers, and would accommodate his steps to hers to keep them there.

Waif was Nell's constant companion and her greatest consolation. The dog was

devoted to her, and could not bear her out of his sight. He had been much out of spirits during her absence in London, and his joy at her return knew no bounds. Either the loss of the master he loved or the sad disposition of his present mistress had sobered his spirit, and he was not nearly so playful now as he had been wont to be. He often sat before her, his silky head upon her lap, his beautiful brown eyes raised to hers, watching her face for a smile or a word—for Waif was the only living creature that could still bring a smile to the girl's sorrowful lips—and it seemed to Nell as if he were asking her of Barrington, inquiring why he had been divided from him, and when he should see the bright face, and hear the cheery voice again calling to him to come out for one of the old happy rambles about the country-side.

And then she would put her face down to his, the soft white cheek lying close beside the smooth black muzzle, and, with her arms round his neck, and her tears upon his coat, whisper to him softly about those old days, about the dear vanished master, and the happiness that never more would return to any three of them. Perhaps he understood something of what she told him. He was very still whilst she rested her face against his and talked to him, only stretching out now and then a loving tongue to lick the wrist beside his neck; and when she had done, he would raise his wistful eyes full of love and sympathy, and, putting one strong paw upon her knee, creep up closer to squeeze his head against her breast.

There was only one thing that Waif loved better than his mistress, only one thing for which he would desert her—and that was

Barrington's old shooting-coat, the one which he had flung upon the ground on leaving his inn at Cotswold Moors for the last time, bidding his dog watch over it till his return.

There are no sophistries, no expediencies in a dog's mind ; circumstances to them do not alter cases in a matter of obedience ; and Waif seemed still to consider that obligation binding upon him. Had not the coat been taken from him by force by Nell, —(he would have permitted no one else to do so,) —it is probable that the greater part of his life would have been spent in fulfilling the injunction. His joy whenever he was allowed to have it and to lie upon it was touching to witness—though none but Nell herself knew of this characteristic, or indeed of the existence of the garment the poor beast loved so faithfully, perhaps as a reminder of his lost friend, and hers.

CHAPTER III.

NEWS FROM THE PRISON.

‘The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year,

Of wailing winds and naked woods, and meadows brown and sere.’—WILLIAM C. BRYANT.

SPRING had merged into summer, and Nell and her dog continued to live a life apart. The girl grew daily more gentle, quiet, and submissive; all the old wilful temper and proud spirit seemed to have died out of her, and the impulsive nature to have undergone a transformation. Formerly she had been gay, outspoken, and prominent in the home life; now she

was silent and reserved ; and if on rare occasions a smile came to her still, sweet lips, it was sadder to see than tears upon a happy face.

On one point, however, Nell showed her old firmness—she would neither go into society nor assist in receiving it.

Mrs. Brereton did not press the point at first, though she fancied the girl's wound would heal the quicker if she would not eschew all change and excitement ; since Nell shrank from it, let her have her own way for a time. It was not within the power of the elder woman's kindly, shallow disposition to comprehend her daughter's feelings. She would have found it difficult to realize that there are natures which never forget, to whom a wound such as this must leave a life-long scar, and who will bear a burden about with them—it may be silently

and patiently—until death lifts it from their shoulders.

Mrs. Brereton was very kind, very affectionate to her daughter in her way: she pressed her to come for pretty drives, she tempted her appetite with especial dainties, she inquired after her health with a tender anxiety—yet could not both mother and daughter help feeling that they were slowly drifting away the one from the other. There was much mutual good feeling, little or no real sympathy.

The one subject on which Nell thought night and day was never named between them; it was better so, both felt. How could the girl talk about her trouble to the wife of the man who had brought this wreck upon her life and the life of him whom she loved and believed wronged?

As for Mr. Brereton, more and more he

seemed to shrink away from the address and even the presence of his step-daughter. He avoided her daily more and more, from motives he would have found it hard to define. Were they compunction, anger, or a carefully-repressed, vague, horrible suspicion that perhaps he had been too precipitate, that possibly he had helped to blast two innocent lives? And they now rarely met except at dinner-time—a silent meal, quickly hurried over, and dreaded by all three as a diurnal trial.

A change of a sort was observed at this date in Mr. Brereton; he was quieter, kinder, more silent than of old, and his bursts of irritable temper of less frequent occurrence. His wife had a better time of it than she had known for years; yet sometimes, as she gazed at the pale face of her daughter, and noticed the strange

silence of the large household, she could have wished the past once more restored, even with its concomitants of constant nagging and frequent curtain lectures.

Everything was so still, so dull, so quiet about the Cedars now; the poor woman sometimes shuddered with a nervous loneliness. There was not even the sound of a gun near the house, no parties of young people starting from the hall door on horse-back, Nell among them, to some distant expedition, no going to races or tennis tournament, no balls or dinner-parties at home or abroad. Even callers were few and far between now; the house seemed to have acquired an evil reputation with the terrible events of the winter; and the young and gay seemed to shrink from coming to it. One or two there were—young men belonging to the neighbouring county families

—who still, impelled by the beauty and misfortunes, or maybe by the money expectations of the heiress at the Cedars, kept up, or tried to keep up, the old intimacy with Miss Lingwood ; but even they, on the rare occasions on which they met and spoke to her, were so impressed by the cold apathy of her voice and manner, that they fell away, and by degrees came no more. Only one had the courage to remain and prosecute his suit under such hopeless circumstances ; and he, when at length he spoke, received so strange, so weary a dismissal, that in after times he wondered at himself for ever fancying there could have been a hope.

The greatest interest of Nell's life now lay in the letters she received from Judith Collyer. The sympathy between these two had knit up a very tender friendship. To Judith Nell could write without reserve,

when her heart felt too full to keep silence any longer. But Judith's letters were not all on the one sad subject ; she wrote often cheery little bits of gossip on any matter that she thought might interest Nell. She was one of those who can be bright and cheerful even under the pressure of a real trouble, when she knew that by its display, she could but add to the weight of the troubles of others. From her Nell heard that Mr. Ponsonby had found time, notwithstanding his many engagements, to call twice at West Kensington ; and also, that Mrs. Keith had actually invited him one Sunday to join in a family dinner, to which Sir Simon, then stopping in town, had asked himself.

Mrs. Keith, wrote Judith, was quite uncommonly partial to Mr. Ponsonby. She, who liked so few people, quite brightened

up at his coming. She admired his wit ; and the two together were quite brilliant. 'Mr. Ponsonby suits me,' she had said ; 'I enjoy his conversation. He shall come and talk to me whilst Sir Simon is philandering after you, Judith.' An arrangement into which Mr. Ponsonby fell quite naturally and pleasantly, the result being a merry, cosy little dinner-party.

August was coming to a close, when a letter of deeper interest arrived for Nell from her friend. It enclosed a second note from Barrington, again written to Sir Simon, and short almost as was the first. There was a visible effort again observable in the tone of this brief epistle ; yet, as before, both women felt it was an unspeakable comfort to them to hear from the prisoner by his own pen. He began by thanking Sir Simon for his letter, and forwarding

thanks to all those who had sent him messages—among whom Nell and Judith knew themselves to be included—stated again that he was perfectly well, and told his cousin that he had been removed to Portland. ‘Send this letter on to whom you will,’ he ended; ‘you know to whom I would wish it sent; but tell her that I would rather that she did not write to me.’

Why did he not wish her to write to him?

Nell asked herself, as she pressed the short sad letter to her lips. Was it that he could not bear the idea of her name being known to those who overlooked the prisoner’s correspondence? Anyhow, she would obey him; he knew her too well to doubt for one moment that her obedience had any other meaning than the fulness of a love which was strong enough to be silent.

Of this letter, as of the first, Mrs. Brereton

never heard. What would have been her feelings had she known of communications forwarded from the convict at Portland to her daughter it would be difficult to say. She was spared the trouble of any reflection upon the matter. She did not even know of De Witt's present situation, nor, indeed, of any of the circumstances of the case; she had merely heard that his death-sentence had been commuted into one of penal servitude for life, and with this more merciful verdict she was, for her own part, fully satisfied. According to her not strictly logical class of mind, that was just how things should be. A man certainly guilty of murder (in her opinion) should be executed; certainly innocent, should be acquitted; but if a case of 'not proven,' he had better be imprisoned for life. It would be a most foolish and unwise thing

to allow any one, who might possibly have been guilty of a crime of violence, to go about at large. This was her course of reasoning, and there are many who reason like her.

In any case she would have considered anything in the shape of a correspondence between De Witt and Nell as most reprehensible and undesirable. There was no doubt in her mind that her daughter must and would forget the man—any other course of conduct appearing to her monstrous and unnatural. Whether guilty of the crime laid to his charge or no made no difference in this: if innocent, she was sorry for him; but that he had ever been accused of such a crime was quite sufficient to lay an insuperable barrier between himself and any girl in Nell's position in life; added to which, in this case, there would

have been a double indecency in the notion, on account of the latter's connection with the murdered man.

Poor Nell was deeply to be pitied, undoubtedly. She must be let to suffer as she listed for a time ; whilst her low-spirited retirement from society was, under the circumstances of the publicity of the shock she had experienced, not only natural but perhaps graceful ; but that would all pass. Time, the restorer, and youth, the renewer, would ere long heal up the wound ; and in another year or two she would resume her old place in county society as the belle and the heiress, and would probably be married to some man of good birth and circumstances, a far better and more suitable match than Captain De Witt.

Had she known the real thoughts and feelings harboured in her daughter's breast

she would indeed have been horrified. But the only index to Nell's constancy was too faint for her short-sighted vision to interpret—the growing calm, the more settled sweetness on the sad face, the sympathy that led the girl's steps to seek out, far and near, for those in trouble, mental or bodily, specially amongst her poorer neighbours. After a time, however, she began to be restless; her mother's heart told her that Nell was too quiet, too silent, her cheeks too pale, and her round young figure shrinking into too hard outlines; and she began to suspect that time was not doing his work satisfactorily, and that her child's trouble remained stationary.

Autumn was now advancing, a brilliant, sunny, bright-leaved autumn, yet, as usual, spreading a vague, misty sadness about its way. It was the beginning of October,

when one day the elder woman came to her daughter with a smile upon her lips. She had a proposal to make. Nell was not looking very well; they were none of them very brilliant or in the best of spirits, and a change would do them good. What did Nell say to going abroad—say to the south of France—for a couple of months or so? They might even winter abroad, if, later on, inclination urged them to stop longer. Mr. Brereton had been consulted, and was quite agreeable. He had business that would take him up to London for a week or two in a few days; after that he was ready to start with them at any time they liked.

The proposal was an unfortunate one, and Nell negatived it hastily, almost before she had realized the meaning of the pain it brought to her heart. Should she divide

herself so far from Barrington, put the sea between herself and him? And how could she bear the sight of foreign scenes, the vivid blue of the soft Mediterranean—recalling, as they would, each moment, that last happy time, when she and Barrington together had laughed over them, conversed beside them?

Then Mrs. Brereton proposed another plan. If Nell did not take to the idea of going abroad, would she at any rate oblige her mother by taking a run with her to the seaside somewhere on the English coast? Later on, as soon as winter was really setting in, Mr. Brereton might move up to town for a stay of several months. The Cedars was too dull and dreary for any of them.

‘I want you to have a change, my dear,’ she remarked anxiously; ‘I think you need

it. We are too quiet here. You are growing sad with moping in this lonely place.'

Nell could have told her mother that no change would affect that sadness whose roots were implanted so deeply in her heart ; but she had no wish to talk over her trouble. After a time, if we hold our peace, the habit of silence grows upon us until it becomes almost an impossibility to break the spell. But she was touched by the love in her mother's eyes ; and turning towards her, kissed Mrs. Brereton on the brow.

'We will go, if you like, dear mamma,' she said.

'That is right,' replied the other, cheerfully. 'The change will do us both good. If it is only England, we need not wait for your papa. I don't fancy he will care to go. I think he will be relieved to find, after all, we are not going abroad ; and we

can be away whilst he is up in town, and so start at once. Shall it be Eastbourne as usual, my dear ?’

‘Just as you like, mother dear.’

And so all was settled ; and Mrs. Brereton at once went off to announce the change of plans to her husband, and to give her orders to the lady’s-maid to begin preparations for the journey. But the next day, when the master of the house had left for London, Nell came to her with a request.

‘Mother,’ she said quietly, but with a flush on her pale face, ‘let it be Weymouth instead of Eastbourne. Do you mind ?’

‘Not the least bit in the world, my dear,’ replied the good-natured woman. ‘We will go anywhere you have a fancy for. Now I come to think of it, I am rather tired of Eastbourne. We know every stick and stone of the place, we have been there

so often ; Weymouth will be a pleasant change. I am glad you proposed it. And I've been thinking, Nell, we will take "Molly" and Hargreaves down with us ; some long rides by the sea will freshen you up.'

'I don't want "Molly," mother, I shall not care to ride ; but I will take Waif with me.'

'Waif—yes, of course ; he is quite one of the family,' said Mrs. Brereton thoughtlessly ; then she remembered herself, and reddened as she glanced towards her daughter.

The next two nights there was not much sleep for Nell Lingwood. She would not see him—he would not know that she was near him—but she would be looking on the same coast, the same sea on which he looked, she would be breathing the same air

he breathed. Alas! would it be comfort, or an aggravation of her pain? was it better to be far away or close beside the object of her daily, hourly thoughts?

In a couple more days the journey was taken; and Mrs. Brereton and her daughter and the maid arrived, one balmy, red-skied evening, at their destination.

The next morning Nell was out with Waif, wandering along the shore at an early hour. All night she had been waiting, longing for the day; and now that it was come, it was as soft and fair as June, and a faint western breeze played refreshingly upon her hot and weary eyes. Mrs. Brereton had been too tired with her journey to go out as yet; so Waif and his mistress could wander on in uninterrupted, grateful quiet. At length they found a retired corner; and here Nell seated herself, the

dog at her feet, whilst her gaze was bent upon the great grey peninsula before her with a sad, hungry eagerness that seemed as if it would overcome distance and intervening obstacles, and bring to sight the one figure for which she yearned. The cruel precipitous rock,—that on this mild autumnal day veiled itself in a vaporous tenderness of hue,—would it ever give up the man who was as dead to her? or was he to spend all his days, his long strong years, in strangling hope and joy and life itself upon its barren solitude? The slow tears rose and dimmed her sight, the island was blurred, the sea grew misty, and laying her face upon her lap, Nell wept with the aching bitterness of those who weep without hope.

CHAPTER IV.

A TERRIBLE MEETING.

‘Viens, viens, dernier ami que mon pas réjouisse,
Ne crains pas de toi devant Dieu je rougisse ;
Lèche mes yeux mouillés, mets ton cœur près du mien,
Et, seuls a nous aimer, aimons-nous, pauvre chien !’

LAMARTINE.

MORE than a week had now passed since Nell and her mother had arrived at the seaside—half the time allotted to their visit; for Mrs. Brereton proposed to be home soon after her husband’s return from town, unless indeed Nell wished to stop longer. Why should she wish to stop longer? Nell asked herself; were not all places the same to her? She was no nearer

Barrington here, she had begun to feel the last few days, than at the Cedars—nay, perhaps less near, for there every turn and every view seemed connected with his former presence, whilst here the very knowledge of his neighbourhood seemed to make the separation more terrible, the intervening distance more hopeless. Yet—if she might but once more see him, once more fix the dear face upon her memory before she left the neighbourhood! If she might but see with her own eyes whether the features she loved were much changed by privation and suffering; if she might but bring a moment's gleam of satisfaction to his troubled heart by the sight of her own burning love and sympathy! How it would help her to bear the long terrible days of the coming winter, could she but feel that for one moment she had lightened

his load of sorrow, had brought for one moment a softened look into the dear blue eyes, had given him one sweet and tender thought to bear him company on his sad and lonely way! It might be that the sight of him—of the man she loved and honoured in his misery and humiliation—might make her own burden the heavier to bear; that the reality of that sad vision might haunt her for long with a more cruel persistence even than did its imagination—it mattered not; there would be a strange sweet antidote to that bitterness in the satisfaction of one more interchange of love, if but the silent interchange of a yearning gaze.

Could it be that by doing this she might offend or wound him whom she longed to bless? Could it be possible that a sensitive pride might cause pain to

predominate at sight of her, and that he might shrink from her loving gaze ?

Oh, no, it could not be ; he loved her too well to shrink from her seeing him in his convict dress. He knew her too well to doubt for a moment that the meeting would but add new strength to her tender loyalty, her deep devotion. Had she been in his place, would she have given room for a moment to feelings of humiliation ? Ah, no ! With her, she felt, there was no power of feeling shame ; love had cast out all other sentiments. She would—could she by so doing have lifted one lightest burden from his shoulders—have knelt down before all his fellow-prisoners, unconscious of their presence, and kissed the very dust off his poor feet.

And so musing day by day, the longing grew within her more and more strongly,

until at length the thought never left her, and by night as well as day she could hear the ceaseless refrain of her aching heart—
‘If I could but see him once more!’

And one morning, as she was walking upon the sands alone with Waif, the opportunity unexpectedly presented itself.

She was passing by the line of boats, when an old fisherman accosted her.

‘Try a sail, lady,’ he urged; ‘there’s a beautiful bit of a breeze; but the sea’s like a pond. Why not go over to Portland? Couldn’t be a fairer day.’

She stood for a moment hesitating, whilst her colour came and went quickly.

He seemed to echo the very words that were even then passing through her mind.

The next moment she stepped into the boat, her resolution taken.

‘Now then, my beauty!’ said the old

man, as he laid his hand upon Waif's head in reaching for his oars.

And at the words Nell turned her head and glanced doubtfully at her dog. Dared she take him? Would not his excitement at the sight of De Witt—if indeed they were fortunate enough to find him—overpower his self-control and cause trouble?—and why should she bring this unnecessary pain—the pain of separation from his master—upon the faithful heart a second time? Yet would it not be acting the part of a traitor to send the dog home, away from the chance of a sight of that master he had loved so well? He might be useful too. If she by any chance should fail to recognize De Witt, he would not, she knew. So she made no motion to repel Waif; and the boat went on its way silently, save

when the old boatman volunteered some passing, scarcely-heard remark; the oars cutting through a still and motionless sea, reflecting in its leaden hues the misty grey of a sky that had rained all night, and was clearing itself slowly, sullenly of the heavy clouds that yet dimmed its cheerless face.

There are some days of which we feel instinctively even at the time that they will be graven upon the tablets of memory with a pen of iron—that, if we outlive by many years man's allotted span of life, will yet remain with every detail clear—even their background of trifling attendant circumstances, of natural environment, mapped out in indelible colours.

So it was with this long day to Nell Lingwood, as she rowed, so silently, so slowly, through the murky air upon the

murky sea; then landed, and shrinking from observation, in her plain black dress with her thick veil, climbed, with Waif beside her, the steep road that led up from the landing-stage. Through the village, up to the bleak sandy plateau that lined the summit, face to face with the great stone building that kept in bondage him whom she held most dear on earth.

The sight of that building turned her for a moment sick and faint, and she paused by the roadside to rest awhile, sitting beneath the shelter of a stone wall.

All of a sudden—she had not sat there many minutes—Waif, who was crouched beside her, sprang up and pricked his ears.

Coming towards them, marching two and two, with a steady tramp-tramp like that of soldiers, and walking from the direction of the cliff-side towards the prison, was a long

file of men, dressed in grey suits and attended by armed warders.

In an instant the blood rushed into Nell's pale cheeks, and her heart beat as if to bursting, as, with one hand grasping the dog's collar, she flung back her veil and gazed towards the line with all her heart in her eyes.

A moment's pause, as the men came nearer, each couple passing the corner and then turning aside towards the prison. Some of these glanced towards her, and some did not. A visitor pausing to stare was no such uncommon sight.

They are on their way back to the mid-day meal; and now is Nell's chance, if ever. Is Barrington among them?

Suddenly, with a quick, sharp cry, Waif is gone from her side. She might as well have caught at the whirlwind as at Waif at

that moment. With one bound he has cleared the enclosure, and is leaping wildly upon one of the convicts, covering his face, his hands with frantic caresses, licking the rough woollen suit, sobbing with a passionate joy.

The convict has paused, and for a moment he holds the animal to him with an uncontrollable impulse of affection, whilst his eyes wander around him wonderingly. Then a warder hurries forward, aiming a blow at the dog—a blow to intercept which the prisoner involuntarily stretches out a strong hand, whilst his eyes flash with hot anger. But before the blow can fall upon either dog or master, a woman's arms are twined round Waif's neck; and so, holding him back and kneeling at the prisoner's feet, for one moment, only one moment—but a moment heavy with the force and the

passion of years of ordinary feeling—De Witt and Nell are gazing at each other face to face.

Not a word from either of them during that short, eternal moment—only in the face looking upwards an undying love, in the face looking downwards an indescribable remorse. Then, with a gesture from the man to the dog, a gesture of command, of dismissal, that poor Waif's breaking heart understands only too well, the prisoner is hurried on, and turns the corner. And Nell finds herself once more leaning against the wall—alone. And still clasping her canine friend, the girl fell, face forwards, upon the cold damp ground.

When she returned to herself she was lying huddled up against the stone wall, all alone beneath the dim grey sky; and Waif was gently licking her hands. She

started up and looked around her. No living thing was in sight — everywhere, wherever her gaze turned, those same grey rocks, grey sea, grey sky. God's sea, God's sky—had He who created them no ears to hear the cry of human entreaty? And with her arms around her faithful companion, Nell sank down again, laying her face against the dog's neck, her breast shaken by the tearless sobs that seemed to bring so little relief to the terrible oppression of her aching heart.

CHAPTER V.

A PRISONER IS RELEASED.

‘As one whom his mother comforts
He lays the soul on His breast,
But He draweth the curtains closely
As it enters into rest;
And none may see it go
Away through the sunset glow.’—B. M.

CHRISTMAS was approaching. It was a mild, damp Christmas in most places; but on the Portland cliffs fierce winds occasionally swept the plateau, and angry waves swirled at the base of the precipitous rocks. Many writers have drawn forcible and pathetic sketches of a contrasted Christmas, as between the rich and the poor; but has any one ever pictured even to himself the

coming on of the Christmas season in a convict establishment? Surely no sadder subject could well inspire the pen.

Barrington was now no longer with the quarry gang; he had been, as he was told, fortunate in obtaining an in-door post just as the rougher season commenced. Had Nell come to the island a few weeks later, she might have waited vainly for a sight of him. His position was one of the best in the prison—that of infirmary orderly, usually given to men of education or former standing.

He had been told that he was lucky to obtain the place, and he experienced that the duties were less laborious and the circumstances easier than in the outdoor work; but for his own part he cared little where he was. A certain callousness was creeping over him, for which the only

antidote was the interest he took in Geoffrey Rainsford.

Rainsford had been removed some time ago from the quarry gang. His health had broken down, and proved manifestly unfit for such severe toil; and in consideration of a long period of faultless behaviour, he had been transferred to a much-coveted post, that of gardener in the grounds of the Governor. This was light and easy work, in every way pleasant to the *ci-devant* singer, who had dreaded lest they should allot him some in-door trade. He was almost happy there. All day long he was out in the sweet, fresh, breezy air, bending above the clean-scented soil, often surrounded by merry childish faces, bright childish voices—the faces and the voices of the Governor's children. He might not speak to them; but he often exchanged with them smiles of

reciprocal kindliness and sympathy ; and his heart warmed with the knowledge that, one and all, the little things regarded him as a friend. Had it not been for the memory of one sad young face, the thought of one young mother weeping over the fatherless babe at her breast, he could, blessed by his gentle, amiable nature, have borne his lot patiently, almost with content.

The great drawback to his new position was the separation it entailed between himself and De Witt. They hardly ever met now ; and the deprivation was as great to one as to the other. The daily contact with a disposition so kindly, so refined as that of Rainsford's was an effectual antidote to the hardening process that moral and mental solitude and an unbroken brooding might have been likely to entail upon the other. His heart was kept open, his

nature could not dry up whilst in company with one who, even amid the hard, coarse brutalities of prison life and surroundings, yet kept intact his own natural characteristics of tender affection and genial sympathies.

Whilst Rainsford had been near him there had been a sense of companionship, of equality, of fellow-feeling; since his departure there had been none—the isolation was complete and paralyzing. Amongst all the others of his fellow-men surrounding him, there was not one towards whom Barrington could feel one ray of sympathy, not one for whom he could ever entertain a feeling of comradeship, or with whom he would ever care to exchange a word. More than one had been his equal in birth and position, and some were both talented and well-educated; but all were vicious, or

craven, or coarse-minded—not one was in any sense a kindred spirit, nor ever could be, unless he were to drop to their level—which God forbid.

The two friends were fated, however, to meet again ere long. The separation, so soon to be a lasting one, was on this occasion to be but short. De Witt had not been much more than a fortnight at his new duties, when one day a new patient was brought into the infirmary. It was Rainsford. He had been prostrated by a second violent hemorrhage; and for an hour or so it was believed that the attack would prove fatal. But it was not so. The patient revived, to linger on yet some weeks in his bed. The smile that lit up his colourless face when, on recovering somewhat, his eyes fell upon the figure of his friend, was touching to see.

‘God is so good to me,’ he whispered softly, so soon as he could find an opportunity of speaking to De Witt unheard. ‘What I dreaded is turned into happiness ! Now I shall have you with me to the end.’

And Barrington made no answer, for his voice was husky, and caught in his throat.

But his work from that day became dear to him. Wherever he moved, he felt those large hollow eyes following him with looks of love ; and he could not glance towards the bed without meeting a smile sweeter surely than any face had ever worn save Geoffrey Rainsford’s. The young man’s patience and gentleness and cheerfulness were something wonderful to witness ; and, even amid that band of low-toned, evil-tongued invalids, seemed to exercise something of an elevating influence.

Not often, but yet sometimes, the two

could exchange a few words together ; but even when no words for hours had passed between them, the sense of companionship remained the same—the chord that bound the sick man to the strong one was daily tightened.

Each day the face of the sufferer grew more wan and deathly, each day the cough more hacking, each day his smile was sweeter, his expression more placidly calm ; and each day Barrington dreaded lest he was looking for the last time on the emaciated features, and in the morning glanced anxiously towards his friend's bed, fearing, expecting that it might be empty.

One day the earnest eyes looked up to his. 'You are innocent, dear friend,' said the dying man, softly. 'God grant you your delivery from this hard life—God grant your innocence may one day be established

in the sight of all men. I was guilty, though the Almighty knows I meant at the time no sin; but I deserved my penalty, and He has given me many alleviations. I only grieve when I think of my poor Florrie—she was so innocent, so young—and I have brought so much suffering into her poor life. God forgive me, and comfort her! She will sorrow so over my death. My poor Florrie, how we loved each other! Will you,’ and he gazed eagerly into his companion’s face, ‘will you, if you can—I don’t know if they will let you—write to her about me—about my death—and tell her how I loved her to the end, and how often I thought of her and the little one, and blessed them both? Will you, if you can, dear friend? It will be so hard for her to bear if she has no friendly word, only the official notice.’

‘I will,’ said Barrington.

For a moment he could say no more ; but the wasted hand met the firm strong hand and rested within it, tightly locked.

‘May God provide for her !’ continued the sick man after a minute ; ‘she will be very poor. God grant she may find friends.’

De Witt’s face flushed.

‘You need not fret for that,’ he said slowly ; ‘I have friends whom I believe, I feel sure, will provide for her—will treat her as a friend, and care for her. I think—I feel sure I can promise you that.’

‘Then,’ said Rainsford, with a beaming face, ‘my one care upon earth has left me ! God bless you—I know I can trust your word. And I thank Him with all my heart for His goodness in sending me such an one as you. De Witt,’ and he pressed the other’s hand again in his weak fingers,

‘don’t despair—try still to hope. There is a God of justice, and in His own time He will proclaim it. Trust Him, dear friend.’

Two days afterwards came the end—painful, as is the last passage often in our fell English malady, when it attacks the young and comparatively strong. It was agony unspeakable to De Witt to watch the protracted sufferings of the man, who had been the one bright spot in his now darkened life, the one warm streak of affection to keep alive his failing spirit—to watch the patiently-borne, drawn-out sufferings, and to be able to do little or nothing to mitigate them. But at the last came a few minutes of peace and release from pain, when the dying man, though unable to speak or move, could lie at rest, looking up with a tender smile

into the face of the friend he loved so affectionately. The desire of his heart had been granted him—he was not to be left to die alone; one who loved him stood over him and held him in his arms. And with the name of his young wife upon them, the last faint gasp passed from between the trembling lips, and Rainsford's weary head fell back upon the bosom of his companion.

And De Witt rose up, and with one long last look upon the pale face, laid it slowly down upon the coarse linen pillow, and walked away alone—henceforth alone in all the bitterness of a moral solitude—amongst the many fellow-convicts who crowded within the strong walls that shut him in for life. And as he did so, he recalled that it was Christmas Eve.

CHAPTER VI.

JOHN PONSONBY IN LOVE.

‘Zwei Kammern hat das Herz
Drin wohnen,
Die Freude und der Schmerz.
Wacht Freude in der einen
So schlummert
Der Schmerz still in der seinen.
O Freude, habe Acht!
Sprich leise,
Dass nicht der Schmerz erwacht!’

H. NEUMANN.

‘It’s all nonsense, Judith ; you must go !’
‘Why must I go ?’
‘For various reasons. First and conclusively, because I say so.’
‘But I don’t admit your authority. Give me a better reason.’

‘There is none so good ; but perhaps some you may be more willing to recognize. You are looking pale and worn-out.’

‘I am growing old, Marion. One cannot keep one’s youth for ever.’

‘Fiddlesticks ! You want change.’

‘Oh, Marion, that is what I feel I hate the thought of most.’

‘Which just proves how much you need it. You want shaking up, and so do I.’

‘Oh, no, *you* don’t, I am sure. I never knew you more brisk and cheerful than you have been the last few months. The cricket on the hearth was nothing to you !’

‘If we had both been as sad and silent as you, my dear, Mary would have given notice, and the house would have become a private lunatic asylum !’

‘Dear Marion, have I been so sad and

silent? I am so sorry. It was very selfish of me.'

'My dear, you couldn't be *that*, if you tried. Your most prominent vice is unselfishness.'

'But I can cheer up without going to Simon's.'

'I think it will be extremely unkind not to go, when you know how nervous he feels at entertaining General and Mrs. Pringle alone. All connections too—it is your duty to go. Besides,' added Mrs. Keith, after a pause, seeing indecision still written upon her companion's face, '*I* want to go.'

'Do you really, Marion? Why didn't you say so before?'

'My dear, anybody else would have known it from the way I pressed the point; but you will persist in imagining me as

unselfish as yourself. You are a vile bad judge of character.'

'Not on that point, I think, Marion. But why do you wish to go—you who never care for visits?'

'My dear, there are visits and visits. It is not every day that one has the chance of forming one of so select a little circle—a Baronet, a General, and a Honourable—not one without his distinction! And one shouldn't miss one's chances, as our old cook said when she married the dustman last year. Also I want an excuse for buying a new dress; my Sunday silk has grown so rusty.'

Judith paused again, and the soft colour flushed into her cheeks.

'I never can feel sure, Marion, whether it is quite nice—you know I am not prudish—but whether it is quite right to

go to Simon's, when—you know what I mean !'

' When he wants to make you Sir Simon's wife? Oh, bother that, my dear!—leave Simon to me, I will manage him. He has quite dropped out of the lover into the old friend line now, I think; and if not, I will take him in hand. Who knows but what he might admire me? It is hard upon me, for I must confess to you, Judith, that I chiefly wished to go for the sake of continuing my flirtation with Mr. Ponsonby; but friendship has its sacred obligations, and I don't mind turning my guns upon Sir Simon instead, to oblige you, for a few days.'

' Well, if we are to go, you really ought to be more civil to him. It is very forgiving of him to ask you, considering the way you always treat him here.'

' My dear, I should be of your opinion

did I not know that the compliment was vicarious. He only asks me to oblige you. But I shall go to spite him. And when I get there, I mean to crush him with my politeness.'

'Whereabouts does your politeness reside, Marion? I have never happened to meet with it!'

'My dear, it is so very first-rate an article that I could not dream of bringing it out for daily use. It is put by carefully for grand occasions.'

A week later the two were established at Rolston Court for their Christmas visit. The party was not a large one, consisting as it did merely of General and Mrs. Pringle, and Mr. Ponsonby, besides the host and themselves.

Mrs. Pringle was Sir Simon's sister—the only living one—who had been in India for

many years with her husband without coming home, and who had perhaps never been on very intimate terms with her brother. He was several years the elder, as she took care to inform everybody, and of a very different disposition.

Mrs. Pringle was a little woman rather under forty ; rather pretty, rather delicate, and very far from wise. The two first of these characteristics she was apt to exaggerate, the third to ignore. She was, however, a satisfactory wife to the General, who adored her, and accepted as full equivalent the high opinion she held of his mental capacity and general importance in the world. He was fifteen years older than she—a somewhat pompous elderly man, yet withal with a genial look in his small eyes, and a hearty comprehension of a good joke, that minimized this social drawback,

and recommended him in the opinion of John Ponsonby.

He was a good teller of stories, and could enjoy those of Mr. Ponsonby ; and his wife and Sir Simon both being, in their separate ways, good listeners, and the conversational powers of Mrs. Keith considerably above the average, the party was an extremely agreeable one, and at times quite brilliant.

Judith Collyer was not so talkative now as she had used to be, but her ready smile and piquant word were always in the right place ; and perhaps of all the party she would have been the one most missed, on account of her quick appreciation and sympathetic tact.

Sir Simon, as usual, was a perfect host ; horses and carriages, pleasant company, and the best of good cheer were always ready for the guests ; and as the weather was

unusually fine and mild, many expeditions were undertaken, even by the fanciful little Indian lady.

Most of these were prosecuted on horse-back, by all but Sir Simon and Mrs. Keith. Mrs. Keith was unable, on account of her injured spine, to ride, and the host was too courteous to permit her to be driven by a servant, however much he might have preferred escorting the riders; and this consideration so touched the lady, that she repaid the kindness by making herself as agreeable as she knew how to be to Sir Simon; by degrees persuading him to forget his former terror of her sharp speech, and to look upon her as a most entertaining and delectable companion.

Riding, with Judith, was a passion; but it was a passion now, in the present state of her finances, not too often indulged.

As a child, the only daughter of rich parents, she had been accustomed to horses and carriages of her own; but, on her father's death many years ago—her mother having died previously—she found herself left but badly off, and the large income which had been expected to be hers dwindled to a mere nothing by his unfortunate speculations. She loved a good gallop over a breezy common on these fresh, bright winter days; and this taste being shared by Ponsonby, was sometimes challenged by him to a turf race, in which the General and his wife were left far behind.

‘I hope it is not rude,’ she said one day—looking over her shoulder at the distant figures, showing like specks upon the horizon—with an apologetic laugh. ‘Let us turn back and canter up to them.’

‘It isn’t the least necessary; they are

perfectly happy alone together. That is a very good character to give a married couple who have been united nearly twenty years, is it not ?’

‘ Yes, it is very amiable of them.’

‘ What a woman’s tone ! But what ?’

‘ I said no but.’

‘ You sounded it. Then you don’t approve of the mutual-adoration system ?’

‘ I don’t know ; it is better than many other systems.’

‘ But not the best ?’

‘ People’s tastes differ.’

‘ Why don’t you answer me ?’

Judith’s pretty face flushed.

‘ I don’t think it quite the highest system, perhaps.’

‘ Would you prefer a mutual-correction system ?’

‘ Mr. Ponsonby, you are not fair ; you

conduct conversation too interrogatively. I am not in the witness-box.'

'I sit reproved, and will give my ideas instead. The adoring system is more likely to be successful with the majority, because the majority of men and women are fools whose prevailing characteristic is their vanity. For the few who prefer self-improvement to the tickling of their moral palate, the other system may be the most satisfactory. But then, they must be good-tempered people, which conscientious persons rarely are.'

'Oh, Mr. Ponsonby, what a sweeping clause!'

'Of course excepting you and I.'

'Are there so few people in the world who prefer abstract truth to pleasant moral obliquity?'

'It isn't popular to hoist your standard

much above that of your fellows, nor to see too far. There is nothing so pleasing in the world as a convenient moral blindness and deafness, and no one so delightful as the person who can flatter gracefully, except perhaps the one who can receive flattery gracefully. And when people have, by long practice, persuaded themselves into believing their own flattery, then they become irresistible.'

Judith laughed.

'Don't talk in that Macchiavellian way!' she said; 'it is horrible to hear you. You make me begin to sympathize with the old woman whose son was had up for stealing, and who remarked of your profession—"I don't wonder they calls 'em 'Lyers,' for I think they'd say anythink!"'

Ponsonby glanced at her approvingly.

'Do you know,' he said, 'that you ought to

take a long ride every day? Nothing does you so much good. This is the second time you have given me a good snubbing out riding!’

‘And do you like being snubbed?’

‘Oh, I am like the table which the cat rubbed when she had lost her mistress. It soothes her, and it don’t hurt me! What I enjoy is the usually dormant energy of character that comes to the fore out riding.’

‘You make me feel as if I ought to apologize!’

‘It is the greatest fun I have. I knew you were not so tame as you looked at first, Miss Collyer.’

‘I *am* very tame,’ she said quietly.

‘You are very sad,’ said John Ponsonby; and as he spoke he suddenly turned towards her and fixed his piercing eyes upon her face.

Judith was taken aback. She could not

deny the charge; and her face flushed, whilst her eyes filled with unexpected tears.

‘I didn’t mean any one to find it out,’ she said, turning away her face to avoid the searching gaze; ‘I didn’t think I had been—low-spirited.’

‘You have been in the most cheerful of spirits. And you have gone to your room alone to cry sometimes,’ he pursued mercilessly.

Poor Judith’s face crimsoned more and more.

‘Is it that you are thinking of that poor fellow—away at Portland?’

She turned towards him, her tears dropping fast; and meeting the kindly gaze, broke down completely.

‘Oh, Mr. Ponsonby, if you only knew what it was! It seems the saddest when one is the merriest. Sometimes, in the

middle of everything, just when things are the brightest and conversation the gayest, the thought comes over one of the contrast—of our luxury, our laughter, and of his hard life, his terrible despair. It is impossible to forget it—day by day it seems to grow a more real, cruel fact.'

'It *is* a cruel fact,' he repeated slowly, with a frowning brow.

'It seems so heartless to be enjoying oneself here while he is pining out there. It is so terrible to think one can do nothing—never do anything for him!'

There was a long pause.

'Justice may still be done some day,' he said at length slowly. 'The truth may be made known—pray heaven it may,' he added in a lower tone.

Then there was another long silence between them; whilst Judith dried her eyes,

and they paced on slowly beneath the leafless trees. When next she turned to speak to him, it was in her usual bright tone, and with a smile upon her lips. Yet was there the consciousness of a new sympathy between them, that was restful to a degree, and soothing to the sadness that kept its gentle hold upon her still. She could not help feeling the change in his manner. He had always been friendly, attentive to her; to-day his words and looks were marked by a quiet consideration that approached tenderness.

When the old General approached her at the hall door, offering politely to assist her from her horse, he glanced at her with an approving smile. The sweet lips were still a little tremulous with emotion, and the soft eyes half moist, whilst a faint pink colour played on the oval cheek.

‘Riding is a becoming exercise to most ladies,’ he remarked gallantly, ‘but to none more than to you, Miss Judith.’

A fortnight passed on pleasantly enough to Sir Simon’s party, and then one or two began to speak of departure. Mrs. Pringle remembered an engagement for herself and the General to a friend’s house in a neighbouring county, and Mr. Ponsonby declared his holiday was drawing to a close. Mrs. Keith, not to be backward in dignity of conduct, fixed the going of herself and Judith for the day previous to that of the Pringles, and some two or three days after that of Ponsonby. It had been, notwithstanding the skeleton in the cupboard to some of the party, a very agreeable and congenial sextet on the whole; and Sir Simon could not but be gratified as a host with the result of his little social gathering.

Yet, although doubtless gratified on this point, there may have been others less entirely satisfactory to the worthy Baronet. But if it were so, neither by word or sign was the fact betrayed.

And now it had come to the last day of Ponsonby's stay. An expedition had been planned the day before; but when the morning dawned, the weather was too wet and gloomy for its accomplishment, and it ended in nothing being done all morning but a little desultory shooting by the gentlemen, the ladies finding it more agreeable to sit over the fire in-doors.

Towards three o'clock, however, the sky cleared; and Judith, after vainly inviting Mrs. Pringle, who had or fancied she had a slight cold, to accompany her, started for a short ramble by herself in the dew-laden grounds. The sun was coming out as she

made her way to her favourite spot, a little eminence whence a wide view of the surrounding country could be obtained.

She was sorry to think it was the last time, sorry to think this visit, which she had so objected to making, was over. It had been a very pleasant fortnight ; she had never known Simon's house so pleasant before. She was still standing in the midst of the rays of the early-setting sun, when she heard steps behind her, and turning, saw Ponsonby. His gun was still in his hand, and his face full of colour with running.

‘ I gave you chase,’ he said ; ‘ I saw you from the avenue below. Are neither of the others out ? ’

‘ No ; Mrs. Keith rarely walks, you know, and Mrs. Pringle has a little sore throat.’

‘ But you are not afraid of the damp ? ’

‘ Oh, no ; I am afraid of nothing ! ’ In

which Miss Collyer did not speak the truth ; for at that very moment she felt, unconsciously, a vague fear of something, she knew not what—a changed look, an air of nervous resolution that seemed to pervade her companion.

There was a minute's silence, and then she turned as if to move homewards.

‘Don't go yet,’ said Ponsonby ; ‘it is the last time we shall be here.’

‘It is a pretty view, is it not ?’

‘I wasn't looking at the view,’ said John Ponsonby.

This was personal, so Judith dashed hastily into another commonplace.

‘Do you miss the country when you get back to town, Mr. Ponsonby ?’

‘I shall miss something more than the country this time. I shall miss *you*.’

‘It is very kind of you to say so. We

have been very good friends. I shall miss you too.'

'I don't want you to miss me in that way,' he said. 'Judith, don't you know—can't you see that I care about you in another way—that I am head over ears in love with you?'

'Oh, no—I never dreamt of it! We have known each other so short a time.'

'I have known you a long time. I have been in love with you ever since this time last year.'

'Last year! I never saw you till this spring. How could you?'

'I will tell you—some day. But didn't you see it all this time we have spent together? What did you think I meant?'

'I thought you wished to be my friend—you were so kind about dear Barrington—'

‘Well, I didn’t then ; I meant much more ! And I mean to have it, Judith, sooner or later, so don’t turn away.’

The ghost of a smile came to her lips.

‘How can you have it if I don’t choose to give it you ?’

‘But I will *make* you give it me !’

‘It would never do. Mr. Ponsonby, do you know how old I am ?’

‘No ; and what’s more, I don’t care one straw.’

‘I am awfully old—much older than you, I think.’

‘I don’t believe a word of it. But if you were old enough to be my grandmother, I should still want to marry you.’

‘You are very—downright.’

‘I am very determined. Why do you fight me so ? Can’t you try to like me a little ?’

‘I like you very much, but I can’t—Why don’t you ask somebody younger to marry you? I am too old for you.’

‘You are the sweetest, loveliest woman I ever saw, and I never mean to marry anybody younger. How can you be so unkind to me?’

‘I don’t mean to be unkind,’ she said, faltering a little.

‘You *sha’n’t* repulse me!’ he exclaimed, approaching her with eyes of dangerous tenderness. ‘Unless you can look me in the face—now—and say steadily, “I hate you, John Ponsonby,” I will not listen to you!’

There was a moment’s pause, whilst the colour came and went on Judith’s cheek, and he stood silently regarding her. Then she suddenly found herself clasped to him.

‘My beautiful darling, you *can’t* say it, you see!’ he exclaimed.

And in a moment he was covering her face with kisses—stifling her murmured—
‘I never said I cared for you!’

Such was John Ponsonby’s wooing—decided, like everything he did; and if abrupt almost to a tinge of brutality, yet bearing the stamp of a sturdy manliness and sincerity. Doubtless he knew what he was about. He had, through his profession, had some experience of the most successful ways of managing the gentler sex, and was not likely to lose a cause which he had at heart for want of either determination or audacity.

Judith Collyer was dressing for dinner, when there came a tap at her bed-room door, and Mrs. Keith entered.

‘Well,’ asked the latter curtly, ‘and how did you enjoy your walk?’

‘Oh, pretty well, thank you.’

‘Only pretty well? Dear me!’

‘Well, this damp weather isn’t the pleasantest, you know.’

‘Damp fiddlesticks!’

‘Well, it is damp, Marion; you can’t deny it, however much you want to quarrel!’

‘You didn’t look damp when you came in, nor Mr. Ponsonby either. You might both of you have been standing in front of Nebuchadnezzar’s burning fiery furnace, you were so red.’

‘What nonsense you talk, Marion!’

‘What do you mean, Judith Collyer, after remaining single all these years, by marrying a man half your age and height?’

Judith’s face flushed crimson.

‘I am three years older than he is, and he is nearly four inches taller than I am!’

‘You haven’t lost time, I must say, in comparing ages and heights.’

‘Marion Keith, I detest you! Can’t you leave me in peace?’

‘Oh, now that you have owned to the fact—’

‘I suppose I have. I do think you might have let me keep my little secret to myself a few hours.’

‘How could you? As if your face, when you entered, didn’t proclaim your little secret with a deafening shout!’

‘Only to you. No one else has such lynx eyes.’

‘I’m not blind, thank goodness. But now that you have confessed, I’ll let you alone.’

‘Thank you,’ said Judith, turning away.

‘Are you angry because of my home truths?’

‘Home truths are no doubt excellent things, but the people who use them—’

‘Are disagreeable persons?’

‘Undoubtedly.’

‘Miss Collyer, it is delightful to see you really cross! It is a new experience. Now I have got you down from your pedestal of superiority, I shall never feel inclined to be rude to you again!’

Judith made no answer. And Mrs. Keith moved towards the door.

‘I will congratulate you another time, my dear,’ she said, a little huskily.

But at the door she turned back again, a whimsical expression on her face.

‘What will poor Simon think of it?’

Judith was silent.

‘Don’t you feel something of a traitor, becoming engaged to somebody else in his very own house, under his very own nose?’

‘Oh, Marion, I do. But how can I help it?’

And at the pathetic appeal, Mrs. Keith broke out into one of her rare, soft fits of laughter.

‘It is most dishonourable! It is a good thing we are leaving to-morrow.’

‘You won’t let it out, Marion?’

‘Not I, my dear. But it is very mean of you all round. Don’t you know I intended Mr. Ponsonby for myself?’

Judith’s good temper was quite restored now, and her pretty face was dimpling with smiles.

‘May I tell him, Marion? He would be so flattered. And I might offer him his choice before it is too late!’

‘No, don’t unsettle him now. I don’t wish to come between you—’ Then Mrs. Keith suddenly approached, and gripped

her companion in her arms. 'Judith, Judith! what a little fool you are! How quick women are to give up their liberty!'

'I haven't been quick, Marion. My only fear is lest, having been so slow, I ought to do it at all—for his sake.'

'*His* sake!' retorted the widow scornfully. 'Trust him to take care of his own interests, my dear! I never knew a man yet who couldn't do *that*, however wanting in other ways. But I should have thought my example would have warned you—'

'I am not afraid,' said Judith, quietly. And the smile on her face was so calm and sweet, and the tone of her voice so low and reverent, that Mrs. Keith felt somehow as if she were in Church; and rising silently, she kissed her friend once upon the forehead and left her.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CONVICT'S WIDOW.

‘O tender beauty of the fleeting years,
O gilding glory of the sweet sad past,
God’s most effectual healing, that endears
To us our bitterest memories at last!’

JOHN PAYNE.

NELL, meanwhile, with her mother and stepfather, was spending the winter in London; and the effect of the change was almost to restore Mrs. Brereton’s habitual cheerfulness. They led an extremely quiet life for visitors to town; still there could not fail to be far more change and variety about the life than that spent in their country house under former circumstances; and to Mrs. Brereton a certain amount

of change and variety was almost indispensable. Their mourning was still too deep to admit of anything like much company, or *bonâ fide* dissipation ; but concerts or lectures were quite the proper thing, and it was impossible to avoid one's friends when one met them in the street, and churlish to refuse a cup of afternoon tea.

By these simple means Mrs. Brereton hoped to lead her daughter insensibly back into that pleasant and social world of their own equals which, so far, since her trouble, Nell had seemed so bent upon eschewing ; and she felt annoyed when she found her plan a failure. Nell was gentleness and submission itself in any ordinary domestic matter ; but she resolutely refused to go into any society so-called, and shrank even from the smallest gathering of strangers or acquaintances in their own rooms.

‘I am so stupid, mamma, now, so dull!’ she urged pathetically, when her mother pressed her, and accused her of obstinacy. ‘I am no good to you in amusing your friends. I cannot talk in company; I never seem to have anything to say. Indeed I have tried, but it is of no use. I am only a wet blanket. Why do you ask me?’

‘For your own sake, Nell.’

‘I am happiest when I am alone with you, mamma.’

‘And you, who used to be so fond of fun, and talk, and gaiety, Nell!’

‘Used, mother!’ The lines of pain deepened on the young face. ‘But nothing ever will be as it used to be, again!’

‘You could get over it if you tried, Nell. I am sure I was sorry enough for you at first. I nearly broke my heart over you; but after a year, I do think you

could get over it if you wanted to. If your father can bear to see people now, why should not you? Do you mean to say the loss of his son was not as much to him as your trouble? We have all had a terrible shock; but it is wrong and self-indulgent to go on nursing and petting it.'

The girl made no answer. How should she explain her feelings to one who could never have comprehended them? 'Get over it in a year!' And he was still toiling, despairing on in prison. The words seemed to her as coarse as they were cruel; though, out of respect for her mother, she tried to repel the reflection.

'I wish,' continued Mrs. Brereton, fretfully, 'that we had never taken that disastrous tour! I wish we had never met with that wretched man!'

Nell turned away with a pale face. A

year before, and words such as these would have roused her hot anger and indignant retort. Now she bore them silently. One more stab was of little account when the heart was sore and bleeding as hers. But, as she sought the refuge of solitude, and sat down in her own room, her face drooped against the head of her chief friend and comforter, Waif, and she whispered to him some of her pain.

‘They think that I can forget him in a year—one short year! And yet, oh, how endless this year has been! But I only love you more and more every day, Barrington. I never, never can forget you; I will always wait for you. Oh, my darling, my own love, I will wait, whether it be for earth or heaven—I will not forget you, if it be for fifty years!’

And then in February came the letter

from Barrington telling of Rainsford's death, and begging Sir Simon to do what he could to comfort the poor widow, and to insure her against destitution. He had not been able to fulfil his promise to his dead friend before; the regulations only permitted of correspondence at the stated intervals. This letter being, as before, sent on to Nell, she begged Sir Simon as a favour to permit her to undertake the errand. And he, divining, by the intuition of his own feelings, the consolation such a commission would prove to the sorrowful girl, replied by a swift and ready acquiescence.

It was too late for Nell to break the sad news to the young widow, or to attempt to soothe her first trouble by a tender womanly sympathy, for the official notification had already reached her two months before, directly after the event; but it was not

too late to bring her the longed-for comfort of a more detailed account of her husband's last weeks and end, and to act towards her as a substantial benefactress in pecuniary matters, at a moment when both mother and babe were upon the verge of absolute want.

This was the first real joy which Nell had known since her trouble had fallen upon her. She was fulfilling a wish of Barrington's, she was doing something which would, when he heard of it, cause him a moment's pleasure and satisfaction. And as she put her arms round the little gentle, girlish widow, even more sorrowful and forsaken than herself, and their tears flowed together, she herself felt a wonderful consolation in the sympathy and comradeship of grief that she had never known before, and that seemed to assuage for a moment the smarting bitterness of her own wound.

And so winter passed into spring, and spring into summer; and not until July approached did the Breretons talk of returning homeward. During this time Nell saw a good deal of Mrs. Rainsford and of Judith Collyer, and very little of any one else. Week by week the friendship cemented between her and the young widow, and she found that her calmest, most contented hours were spent in the little dim London sitting-room, where the mother sat nursing her fatherless babe, and where together they talked over ways and means for the support of the pair. For Mrs. Rainsford was an independent little woman, for all her girlish, clinging ways; and she refused to accept more pecuniary assistance than was absolutely necessary, even from so sympathetic a friend as Miss Lingwood.

But perhaps a greater comfort to her

even than monetary help was the power to pour out the history of all the sufferings, the joys, and the anxieties of her short married life into compassionate ears, and to expatiate on the goodness of heart, the tenderness, and unselfishness of the husband whom she had loved so dearly, and who, misled by his love for her, had committed the fatal false step which had been the ruin of both their lives. Nell was so patient in listening to her story, so full of a pitiful interest and sisterly compassion, that her visits came to be the bright spots of life, the chief solace—after the love of her child—to the poor woman.

Of Judith, Nell did not see quite so much. West Kensington was a long way off from Ennismore Gardens; and once, when Nell had gone thither, she had found Ponsonby and his *fiancée* together, full of

a mutual happiness: and somehow, the sight had jarred upon her. She had returned home, and taken herself to task for the selfishness which in its own absorbing sorrow grudged joy to others; yet the feeling remained. It appeared instinctively to her a sort of slight upon the memory of Barrington for the one who had most of all seemed to love him and to participate in her own sufferings over his cruel fate, to be forgetting now, to be smiling and joyful, absorbed by a new and engrossing affection. And yet she knew that Judith was not all joyful; she knew in her heart that Judith did not forget, that her faithful heart still mourned as much as ever over De Witt, and yearned to assist him; and telling herself that she was both cruel and unreasonable in demanding that her friend should renounce all domestic happiness for

the rest of her life as proof of the constancy of her feelings, she strove her best to check the new and unaccustomed constraint that seemed inclined to rise up between herself and Miss Collyer.

But with Judith it was impossible to be constrained long. She was so loving, so frank, so true-hearted, that, once alone together, the phantom faded, and all Nell's old affection for her would return. She too was a friend upon whom the girl could lean, and whose mind was matured — not merely a clinging, loving nature, like that of Mrs. Rainsford. Sometimes Judith would take the other gently to task for the long intervals that elapsed between her visits. Miss Collyer never came to the house in Ennismore Gardens; she had the feeling that she could scarcely look with equanimity upon Mr. Brereton, nor could she have

taken his hand if by any chance he had offered it to her.

But though thoroughly happy in the fact of her engagement, her old friendship for Nell was as strong as ever, and she quickly divined the feelings that stirred the girl's heart.

‘Dearest,’ she said one day, reproachfully, as she put her arm round Nell’s waist, ‘if I could, I would almost wish that I had never seen him,’ (the ‘him’ of course referring to Ponsonby,) ‘if he is to come between you and me. It grieves me to lose your confidence, but still more to think it may cause you yourself to suffer deprivation. Why can you not talk to me as freely as you used to do?’

‘I love you and trust you as much as ever, Judith, indeed I do—’

‘Why should he come between us, dear

Nell? You know how much he cares for the one we are always thinking about—how hard he has worked for him. He would do anything now, give up almost anything, I think, if he could but restore Barrington to freedom and happiness. Don't dislike him, Nell!’

‘I know, I know, Judith, I don't dislike him. I am grateful to him. If I wanted anything—any advice or help—I would go to him before any one else.’

‘And he would help you, dear, to the uttermost of his power. There is nothing he would work for as he would for that; and not because he loves me only, but because of truth and justice' sake, and because he cared so much for Barrington.’

‘Indeed, Judith, I look upon him as a friend. I know how good and generous he is.’

‘But you don’t like meeting him, dear! You shrink from him—and, I sometimes think, almost from me.’

‘Oh, Judith, can’t you understand? It must seem so mean, and churlish, and ungenerous to you! Indeed I am glad you are happy. It is horrid of me to wound your feelings. But, somehow now, I seem so far apart from any one who is like that. I am not envious of you, dear—I don’t grudge it you—’

‘My poor darling!’ And Judith’s arms were round her neck. ‘Of course; it is very natural. I ought to have understood it before. I dare say I should feel the same. Do you know, sometimes, as it is, Nell, I experience a sort of spasm of repulsion against myself for feeling happy, and forgetting him—poor darling—for an hour or two. If it were anybody that did not

care for him I should feel it more. But —John—is so kind and sympathetic; he never grows weary of my talking of it, and doesn't complain of my looking sad sometimes. That is one reason, Nell, which makes me care for him; he is so patient and so gentle with me—many men would be angry with one for not always thinking of them; but he is so unselfish, he spoils me.'

'No one could help spoiling you, Judith; you are so sweet and lovable.'

'And now,' she continued, after a pause, taking no notice of Nell's remark, 'now there will be another useful little reminder that there can be no happiness in this world without some drawback to cloud it.'

'Don't let me be your cloud, dear Judith.'

'It is not you, dear child; it is one's own greediness in wanting the best of

everything; in expecting to keep all the old satisfactions and friendships, when one has the new.'

Nell laid her cheek against her friend's hand.

'I thought,' she said softly, 'that trouble always made it easier to be unselfish; but I find there are different ways of being selfish. When one is happy one finds it hard to sympathize with people in sorrow; but when one is sad, it is almost more difficult to feel sympathy for those who are happy. Oh, Judith, it is dreadful to think that because one is sorrowful oneself, one does not want any one else to be joyful. That is hateful! One should wish it all the more, because one knows how terrible trouble is. You must help me not to grow into a monster like this!'

Judith kissed her silently.

‘I don’t think there is any fear of your becoming a monster of selfishness, my Nell. You think a great deal of others, I should say.’

‘Only of those in trouble, Judith. I thought at first that I was becoming very good and charitable, because I have been so much amongst the poor ; but I see now it was only a sort of self-indulgence, because their trouble was congenial to me.’

‘It was a very good form of self-indulgence, Nell.’

‘Yes ; and I don’t want to give it up. But I am afraid it would be nobler to try to do as mamma wishes, to try and mix amongst those who are bright and gay—our own set. I seem to have nothing to do with them now, Judith. Is it my duty, do you think ? Don’t say so, unless you are sure it is !’

‘My darling, I cannot see that it is your duty ; at any rate for some time to come. They must give you time to heal your wound in some degree first. It would be cruel to ask you to do violence to your natural feelings as yet.’

‘I don’t think time will ever do much, Judith. Are there not some troubles that people never get over ? Am I a coward, do you think ? Could I get over it—I mean, so as to *look* as if I had got over it—if I tried more ?’

‘Nell, you are no coward ; you have been brave and patient. God help you, poor child !’

‘He has helped me, Judith, or I could not have lived through it. Do you think He has helped Barrington too ?’

‘My darling, I trust so. Nell,’ she continued after a moment, ‘how thin you

are growing! You are quite shrunk up, child.'

'It won't hurt me, Judith. I suppose people who go through a good deal must grow thinner. It doesn't signify.'

'Yes, it does; I don't like it.'

'I am not ill, and that is all that matters.'

'I don't like it, Nell; you are looking very white.'

'Am I losing my prettiness, Judith? I am afraid I am. I say I am afraid, because, you know, if ever we did meet again,—I can't help fancying it *may* be possible some day, perhaps years and years hence,—I shouldn't like him to think me grown old and ugly.'

'Don't fancy that, dear Nell; don't dwell on such a thought. It isn't wise.'

'But why, Judith, when it is my only

hope—the only thing sometimes I feel I live for? Such things do happen—men do get let off—after a long, long time sometimes—when they have never gone against the regulations, or done anything wrong in prison. And why not him?’

‘If it were so, which God grant—still, dear Nell, it might be wiser, it might be happier for both of you——’

She paused.

A deep flush spread over Nell’s pale face, and she rose up suddenly.

‘Judith!—if we never met? Was that what you were going to say? Why, Judith, if it were twenty, thirty years hence, if we were both grown grey and old, do you think I should have forgotten? Do you think I would not go to him anywhere? Or do you think he would have forgotten me?’

‘No, dearest. But he might feel that he would never consent to such a sacrifice for you.’

‘Sacrifice! Why, Judith, are you dreaming? Don’t you know that the very thought of it nearly drives me mad with joy? He should never escape me, so long as I knew he loved me—I would follow him all over the world.’

‘And suppose he refused to marry you—suppose he was too generous to accept your generosity?’

‘Then,’ said Nell passionately, ‘I would die at his feet! It would kill me.’

And Judith this time did not break the silence that ensued. What was the good of discussing a painful contingency little likely ever to come to pass?

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR SIMON GIVES A PRESENT TO THE BRIDE.

‘ Ainsi, je ne lis plus. Moi, lire ! Eh ! quel poème
Egalerait jamais la voix de ce qu’on aime ? ’

LAMARTINE.

At the beginning of July Nell accompanied her mother and stepfather home to the Cedars ; and about a month later Judith Collyer became Mrs. John Ponsonby.

The wedding, by desire of the bride, was a very quiet one, rather to the dissatisfaction of Mrs. Pringle, from whose house in Surrey it took place, and who would have preferred to make a much greater fuss and noise about the affair.

Almost the only guests invited were Mrs.

Keith, Sir Simon De Witt, and Lord Henton, the eldest brother of the bridegroom, whose acquaintance Judith had made some weeks before, when, in company with Mrs. Keith, she had paid a formal visit of introduction to Killymore Towers, the seat of the old Earl, Ponsonby's father.

Lord Presbury was a widower, and a kindly, courteous old man, whom Judith's grace and sweetness of manner had speedily subjugated. He had a large family of sons and daughters, all of them married except John, the youngest; and was in no ways affected in his opinion of his new daughter-in-law by the fact of her small dowry. His sons had mostly married without much consulting him—independence of disposition seemed to be a characteristic of the family; and although several of them had married younger, richer, or more aristocratic

brides, yet none had brought him a daughter more to his taste than this lovely, soft-eyed woman, with her piquant expression and her refined manners.

Judith's great trouble was in leaving Mrs. Keith.

John Ponsonby was so absurdly in love, that for the first time in his life his common-sense showed signs of deserting him, and he actually proposed—when he became aware of his *fiancée's* anxiety upon the subject—offering the widow a home in their own establishment, until such time as any better arrangement should turn up.

Fortunately, however, for him, the women with whom he had to do were better advised; and Mrs. Keith, the moment the plan was mooted, negatived it too decisively to leave room for its mention a second time. She pooh-poohed the idea of being lost or

lonely, and would not discuss the question which weighed upon her friend's mind with even her usual small stock of patience.

‘I shall do very well,’ she remarked briefly. ‘Mind your own affairs, Judith—you have plenty of them, I should think, to satisfy your mind—and let me alone.’

‘But I can't let you alone, Marion. It is so horrid leaving you in this way.’

‘Do you think I can't live without you, you silly girl?’

‘Have you no one—no relation who would join you in your house-keeping like I have done?’

‘I hate all my relations,’ responded Mrs. Keith promptly. ‘At least, there is one little niece I don't so much object to; but I dare say she wouldn't come.’

‘Promise me to write and ask her. You are too delicate to live alone.’

‘In that case, it would be a good riddance if I were to die. However, if you are going to fuss yourself into a fever, I suppose I must write. But we should have to move into lodgings, I expect.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because this palatial mansion of eight rooms would be a great deal too expensive for us to keep up.’

‘It is so cheap, Marion!’

‘I know it, my dear; and so is the “General.” They only cost threepence per annum between them; but then Mabel and I should only have twopence halfpenny a year to live upon!’

The night before his cousin’s marriage, Sir Simon managed to secure the bride-elect to himself for a short interview.

‘Judith,’ he said in his slow tones, ‘I have been thinking a good deal about what

present I could give you on your wedding day that would please you best.'

'Why, dear Simon, you have given me one already—that lovely diamond necklace. You surely don't want to give me anything more?'

'That was my mother's, Judith, and cost me nothing. I always intended it for you, and had left it you in my will. But I wished to give you something else, and I hope you will think I have chosen right. Perhaps you will say it is more of a present to Mrs. Keith than to yourself.'

'To Mrs. Keith?' she asked, wondering.

'I know how fond you are of Mrs. Keith, and I have noticed how much anxiety you have felt about leaving her. I thought perhaps—' here Sir Simon, who was the most absurdly delicate-minded man that over breathed, paused and reddened—'that

perhaps pecuniary considerations might have something to do with it.'

'It had,' said Judith frankly.

'I ascertained,' continued Sir Simon, 'that Mrs. Keith still desired to continue on in your London home with a young relative, who would join her in your stead; but that the rent of the house might prove an obstacle. So,' and he placed a bundle of legal-looking papers in his companion's lap, 'I made inquiries about the place, and finding it was for sale, instructed my London lawyers to buy it for me. Those are the title-deeds of possession. I thought—so unselfish as you are—that you might prefer it to any more personal gift. But it is nothing to thank me for,' he added hastily, seeing the expression of her face; 'the price was a mere nothing—absurdly inexpensive. I had no

idea houses in town were to be had such bargains.'

'Simon, *how* generous you are! Oh, it is so good of you! I couldn't have liked anything else one quarter so well!'

'Really, Judith?' asked her old friend, his face kindling with quiet satisfaction at the sight of her pleasure.

'Really and truly. You have taken away my only anxiety. You are the best and kindest old Simon that ever lived! But it is too much—I don't know whether I ought to accept it.'

'You can't help that,' said the Baronet, with a quiet smile. 'The deeds are made out to you, and the property bought in your name.'

'I did so hate the idea of Mrs. Keith going into cheap lodgings! Now she will be quite happy in her own little house.

But you give me too much, Simon ; you have always spoilt me.'

'No one could spoil you,' he said, looking down tenderly upon her beaming face.

'Thank you a thousand times, dear Simon. You have made me so happy.'

'I am very glad,' was all he said, as he stood for a moment holding in his the hand she had stretched out to him.

'God bless you, Judith !' he said suddenly ; and for a moment he seemed to lose command of his voice.

As he spoke he bent down, and she, with a willing smile, raised her face to meet the one kiss he pressed upon it—the only kiss he had ever given to the woman he had loved since her childhood.

The next day Sir Simon fulfilled his important duty of giving the bride away, and in so doing, managed to commit as

many mistakes as it was possible for a man to do. He was staring about him when the officiating clergyman demanded, 'And who giveth this woman to be married to this man?' and apparently did not hear the words; and when restored to consciousness of the situation by a dig in the elbow from General Pringle, who stood beside him, moved confusedly towards that officer's wife. He was a great deal more embarrassed, both in church and at the breakfast, than the bridegroom himself, who accosted him in the very porch with the remark,

'Confound the man! do you think I wanted to marry Mrs. Pringle? If I were the General, I'd call you out!'

But his confusion culminated when his sister, at the breakfast table, committed the fatal mistake of asking him to say a few words of congratulation—'not exactly a

speech, you know, Simon—' to the newly-united couple.

He floundered about in a perfect quagmire of relationships and family events, mixing up everything into a hopeless chaos, losing both his nominatives and himself twenty times, until both John Ponsonby and Mrs. Keith thought it time to put an end to the performance.

'Hear, hear!' exclaimed the former at the top of his voice, rapping on the table with all his force; 'don't give us any more heads, Sir Simon. I've already three-and-twenty separate counts on which to return thanks.'

Whilst Mrs. Keith remarked, *sotto voce*, 'He has married everybody round the table at least three times; and bigamy, however pleasant, is a felony now, I believe!'

But at last it all came to an end, and

Judith could escape to her room to change her dress, yearning for a little quiet, a little release from that noise and publicity, and bustle, and repartee, which is the portion and the trial of every bride.

A few kindly good-bye kisses, many warm good wishes ; and then into the carriage with John, to drive the five miles to the country station.

How peaceful it seemed then ! And, as the green fields and over-arching trees went slowly by, she turned her face towards his, to see all the keen sarcastic humour that had flooded it but a few minutes ago changed now into a wondrous tenderness and love, and to hear the clear peremptory voice softened to that tone of gentle reverence which must greet the ears of every woman really loved and honoured by her bridegroom.

CHAPTER IX.

JUDGMENT FALLS UPON THE GUILTY.

‘Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind ;
The thief doth fear each bush an officer.’

SHAKESPEARE.

‘WELL, sir, he’ve been wishing it this long time. He’s been discontented-like at home. And when Jim’s once got a thing in his head, you might as well try to move that mountain yonder. Seems as if young people was always looking out for change and excitement now-a-days ; and he fancies as he can better himself in them foreign parts.’

‘He could better himself here. I should raise his wages. I don’t see how he can want a more comfortable place.’

‘Nor I, sir. I’m sure I’d a deal sooner see him staying on here, where I’ve worked all my life, than rushing off to outlandish parts which one knows nothing of. I’ve argued with him till my tongue aches. But what’s good enough for the parents ain’t good enough for the children now-a-days. And he always had a restless, discontented temper, had Jim. I don’t so much fret about his going, sir, for he’d better be happy away than glum at home; but it does vex me above a bit his wanting his sister to go out with him, and she quite content in a good situation at Tentbury.’

‘Why don’t you forbid her going?’

‘Well, you see, sir, she was always a bit spoilt, my maid Lucy—being motherless from a child, and so forth; and I don’t know how to begin crossing her now if she’s set her heart upon it.’

‘But it’s monstrous for both your children to leave you at your time of life.’

‘It is, sir; I call it cruel work. It’s been lonely enough all this year with Jim away and Lucy in service. And now I may never see them again. But you rear up children, and then they defies you!’

‘When does Jim want to go?’

‘At the end of the month, sir, if you can spare him. He’s heard of a vessel going to New York that will suit him then. And my girl’s coming to see me first.’

‘Mrs. Brereton will speak to her about the wrong course she is taking. Perhaps she may restore her to a sense of her duty.’

‘Thank you, sir. I’m sure I hope she may persuade her to give it up. She don’t seem so set upon it, to my thinking, as Jim; but they was always very fond of one another, those two, being the only ones;

and she thinks a deal more of Jim's bidding than of mine.'

The foregoing conversation was held between old Barrett and his employer towards the end of August.

A month later James Barrett, who adhered to his resolution with the sullen obstinacy which was a part of his character, had received his discharge; and, with his wages, and a fair sum—accumulated during the past year or two in the Savings Bank—bestowed safely in his pocket, was making his way to Liverpool by the morning train. He was alone, and none the more cheerful for that. At the last moment the persuasions of every one had prevailed both with him and with his sister; and Lucy had been induced to give up the idea of accompanying him. Truth to tell, Lucy was not so difficult to persuade, since it was

chiefly the desire of her brother which had weighed with her ; and, so soon as he gave his reluctant consent to her remaining behind, she acquiesced willingly enough in all the arguments of her friends.

But Jim was sore at heart in having to go alone. He was a morose and silent young man, who had all his life long petted and loved but one person, and that was the pretty, delicate-looking little sister nine years younger than himself. He would never have given way had it not been for Miss Lingwood's persuasions. Touched by the sorrow and prospective loneliness of the old father, she had sought him out a few days ago.

‘Jim,’ she had said earnestly, ‘do not be a cruel son. Would you leave the poor old man to die alone ? Surely you cannot do such a thing as that ! Are you so hard of

heart, Jim? Oh, have pity on him! He has always been a good father to you.'

The young man had paused, his expression troubled, and making no answer.

'Jim,' she went on more softly, 'we all ask it of you. You know Lucy will do as you tell her. You will not refuse? You are young and strong; you don't know what it is to be lonely and old and sad at heart! You can marry out there if you like. Won't you give up your own wish just this once?'

There had been another momentary silence, and then the young man had taken up his cap and rushed out of the house without a word. He could not look up and face those sad eyes fixed upon him so gently, so earnestly.

But the same evening Lucy came up to tell Miss Lingwood that the idea of her emigrating with her brother was given up,

and that Jim had promised his father he would go out alone.

Yet now, as he travelled westwards, watching through the little third-class window the passing monotony of green hedges, of greener pastures, and of trees beginning already to turn their leaves to a ruddier hue, he repeated her words to himself with bitterness.

Not know what it was to be lonely and sad at heart? Who could know better? How often had he longed, with an aching desire, that only just fell short of fulfilment, to put an end to an existence so miserable, so lonely—to quench in self-destruction the dark despondency which weighed upon him night and day?

With never a friend in the world, with that terrible silence weighing like lead upon his bosom, that terrible secret for ever

hanging round his footsteps like a heavy chain, what pleasure was there in life, what satisfaction is any earthly thing? Yet now at last, perhaps, he was going to know what was meant by peace and a quiet mind—now at last perhaps, in a new and far-away country, he might learn to shake off the restless trouble which had so haunted him in the old one.

On reaching Liverpool he got out, and finding his way to the docks, made his inquiries, and took his berth in the vessel which was to sail to-morrow. There was no more to be done; his package of clothes was all ready, he need not embark till midnight, and he had nothing better to do than to stroll aimlessly about in the endeavour to while away the intervening hours.

It was now about five o'clock, and a slight fog was beginning to descend upon

the crowded quay. The noise and clatter of the innumerable vehicles, most of them heavy carts or drays, served both to confuse and to amuse him. A large town such as Liverpool was sure to make an impression upon the country-bred young gamekeeper, who had never seen any town bigger than Tentbury; and he stood for long simply watching the waggons pass, and then strolled along the pavement slowly, deafened and distracted by the strange, unaccustomed life into whose vortex he had suddenly plunged, yet pleased and interested thereby.

Suddenly, however, he paused and stood still. A large placard, posted up against the wall, had caught his eye. Some of the words were in letters an inch long—‘ESCAPED CONVICT’—‘FIVE POUNDS REWARD.’ He remained staring at it with a strange fascination. An escaped convict—fair hair

and complexion—five feet eleven in height. Why did the description bring all the blood in his body to his face, and set him trembling—strong man though he were? Fool that he was, to be sure! Why should the perspiration stand upon his forehead, and what was the use of reading and re-reading the placard? In what did it affect him or his? And then a horrible picture, like a nightmare, rose up before his mind's eye, and he shuddered. It was the vision of a man—an innocent man, wronged and desperate—suddenly appearing before him on the deserted deck of a moonlit vessel, and saying to him, ‘Now at last for a settlement—now at last for justice—or you die!’ And then perhaps a silent death-struggle, a foot missed, a blow aimed by the strong arm of an adversary, and a plunge beneath the cold black waters—

waters leading to judgment and to a God of Justice ! It was but a nightmare dream, as impossible as horrible. Was he to be cowed by such a girl's fancy as this ?

‘Now then, mate !’ said a passing sailor loudly, as he elbowed his way past the young man, ‘are you a-going to stand there all night ? You don’t want all the pavement to yourself, do you, though you *are* such a well-growed young land-swab ?’

‘He’s taken root—ain’t yer ?’ asked a flaunting girl beside him.

Barrett looked up vaguely, seeming scarcely to hear their remarks ; and his expression roused a laugh on the faces of several bystanders.

‘Pears,’ remarked another young man, ‘as if he’d seen a ghost. What was he like, mate ?’

‘Maybe,’ suggested a girl maliciously,

‘that’s one of his friends as is advertised to be run away!’

‘His brother maybe — or perhaps himself!’ added the man, seeing the joke relished.

Jim gazed at them for a moment with a startled look; then, amid the general laughter, moved hastily away, turning to cross over the road.

The loud laughs were still ringing in his ears, and the strange horrible vision confusing his brain, and he hurried on through the thick fog without thinking of where he was going.

Suddenly there was a shout. What was it that hit him in the side? He fell down—there was a heavy crash, a far-off sound of something grinding, a singing in his ears—then a blackness of darkness, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER X.

THE MURDERER'S CONFESSION.

‘For, infinite as boundless space
The thought that Conscience must embrace,
Which in itself must comprehend,
Woe without name, or hope, or end.’—BYRON.

NELL LINGWOOD was sitting in her little boudoir up-stairs reading, or trying to read,—for it was a strangely difficult process to her now to fix her thoughts for many moments together on the thoughts of any writer, however interesting,—when the door opened, and a servant entering, put a telegram into her hands.

She opened it listlessly; but the next moment sprang to her feet. Her cheeks

were crimson, her eyes shone with an unnatural brilliance, her hands trembled so that she could scarcely hold the paper, and a mist swam before her eyes. Was it true—really true—at last! For an instant she covered her face with her hands, and caught her breath with difficulty.

It must be true—the Almighty would not permit so cruel a deception! And down upon her knees she fell. There was no actual prayer upon her lips, no consecutive words of thanksgiving; but her whole heart seemed to rise up and call aloud in one great cry of joy and gratitude.

And what were the words pencilled upon the official paper? They were but few.

‘A man of the name of Barrett has made confession of the murder of Robert Brereton. He is dying, and desirous, if possible, to see one of the family.’

The telegram was dated, not much more than an hour ago, from a Liverpool Hospital.

A few hours later Nell was seated—Mr. Brereton opposite her—in the express going northwards. How those hours had passed she scarcely knew—to her memory it was all confusion, chaos; everything presented a blank save the one idea that excluded all others—the murderer was found, and Barington was free !

She had a vague remembrance that her mother had sharply combated her intention of journeying to Liverpool, and she knew that the arguments had fallen upon deaf and unconscious ears, and that she had been prepared, if need were, to go alone, and alone to walk through the darkness of night to the little railway station sooner than give up her purpose; that at the last moment she had been startled into con-

sciousness by the appearance of Mr. Brereton in the hall, dressed for the journey, and that he had turned the current of her mother's expostulations by announcing, 'I will go with her.'

His hands were trembling and his voice broken, but it was in vain for his wife to argue with him—to try to represent to him how unfit were his nerves for so terrible an interview; he merely repeated doggedly, 'I shall go.'

And now they were upon their way—he to a re-opening of the one deep wound of a shallow, selfish existence; she to receive the verification of a fact too consoling for words to express, to the uplifting of a load that had well-nigh crushed out her life. And as she gazed in silence across the railway carriage, feeling her own heart bursting with joy and excitement, and saw

the twitching lips of her companion, and the ashy features upon which fell the fitful gleam of the gas lamp, her heart for the first time filled with a deep and womanly compassion for the father about to be brought face to face with the murderer of his only son ; and for the first time she felt that she forgave him, fully and freely, the injury he had done to Barrington.

The terminus was reached at six o'clock ; and a couple of hours later the sender of the telegram—the chaplain of the hospital, to whom reply had been sent—presented himself at the hotel. The introductory words were brief, and Mr. Carter at once placed in Mr. Brereton's hands a paper.

‘That is the confession,’ he said. ‘I was afraid last night the man might not live many hours—I forget if I told you that he was run over, and received internal injuries

of a fatal character—so I lost no time, when I found the nature of his communication, in sending for a magistrate, before whom it was taken down. It is quite complete and legal. But he will never live to stand before a human judge for his crime ; before many hours are over he will have given up his account to God.'

Mr. Brereton cleared his throat and tried to speak, but his voice failed him. He sat down and attempted to open the paper, but his trembling fingers refused to grasp it.

The clergyman cast a glance of compassion towards him.

'The details will be very terrible for you and your daughter to hear, sir,' he said gently. 'Shall I tell you the main facts?—and will you leave the reading of the confession to another time, when you are less shaken than now?'

‘No,’ at last said the other, with white lips; ‘read it now.’

‘How long is it since—you lost your brother?’ inquired Mr. Carter in a low tone aside to Nell.

‘Rather more than a year and a half,’ she said, with a groan, to think of those terrible twenty months during which the murderer had successfully nursed his awful secret in his breast.

‘I trust,’ repeated the chaplain, hesitating, ‘that it won’t be too much for you both.’

But Nell made him a hasty sign to begin—she felt she could bear no longer delay; and he commenced reading:—

‘I, James Barrett, of Cotswold Moors,——shire, now lying, as I believe, upon my death-bed, swear solemnly, as before God, to these facts. That it was I who murdered Robert Brereton, of the Cedars,

——shire, and that Captain Barrington De Witt, convicted last February year of the crime and now in prison, is innocent of any complicity with or knowledge of the deed. And I swear, also, to the truth of the following facts, as I hope to find mercy before God at the Last Day.

‘That on the evening of the twenty-eighth of December, the day of the murder, I met with the said Robert Brereton unexpectedly, having no premeditated intent whatever to hurt or injure him in any way. I was working at a place called Rodderhampton, some nine or ten miles off, also the property of my master, Mr. Brereton, in whose employ I had been many years as gamekeeper; and this evening—Saturday night—having found opportunity to come over unexpectedly, and feeling a desire to see how my sister, whom I had not met

for some three weeks, was going on, I left home without telling any one, and walked across the country in the dark towards my father's house. I was already close by the cottage, which is situated in the wood near the Cedars, when I heard the sound of angry voices. At the same moment my sister Lucy, it then being a little after ten at night, ran into my arms, terrified and crying. When I got her to tell me the truth, she confessed that the young master had frightened her, that he had tempted her away from the cottage door, and was proceeding to detain her by force, when some one—Captain De Witt—suddenly appeared upon the spot.

‘It wasn't the first time Mr. Robert had played this game. My sister was a good girl, but vain like other girls, and she didn't always discourage him as she ought. But

I knew she meant no harm, and that she'd never be likely to come to it, so long as he'd let her alone. She was my only sister, and I'd always been fond of her. There wasn't none of our family as was ever light of ways, and I didn't mean Lucy should be the first. I made up my mind to have an end to it once for all. Mr. Robert hadn't ever been over partial to me, nor me to him; he didn't care for my looking so strict after Lucy; and I was angry enough with him for his philandering after her. But, before God, as I went after him that night, I never thought to murder him. There's never been a moment, night or day since, that I wouldn't have changed places if I could—that I wouldn't rather that he had struck me down than I him.

‘When I got a few yards on I saw a stick lying in the pathway, and I took it up, and.

went on with it in my hand. A little further on I overtook him. "Just stop a moment, sir," I said. I was so furious that I didn't much know what I said or did. "When are you going to let alone my sister?" "You and your sister may go to the devil," says he. "That's where you want to send her," said I, "I know; but first you'll have to reckon up with me." With that he used words—I can't get my tongue to say them now, gentlemen, but God above knows what they were to hear against my sister, her that was pure as a young lamb, and never would have heard a word of evil if it hadn't been for what came from his own lips.

'I was like one mad, and I sprang at him. "Fight it out," said I, "like a man; if you are a man, and not a devil!" He raised his foot against me, with more words of the

same sort ; and then I aimed at him with the stick I held, with all my might. I scarcely saw the blow descend, but I saw him fall like a log, and in a moment my fury was sobered. I bent over him, and shook him, and called to him ; and then I felt his pulse and his heart, and I went cold all over, praying God that I hadn't killed him. But he never breathed nor moved after one short gasp ; and his heart had quite stopped. I wouldn't believe at first he was dead ; but when I was sure of it, the sweat come out all over me, and I said to myself as I caught sight of the pond lying near by, " I can't restore him to life, or I would. I didn't mean to murder him. Why should I confess to it and be hanged, when I didn't mean it ? Nobody will be the worse for my hiding it up ; and I shall be the better." So I felt once more for

his heart, to make sure that he was dead—before God I did—and then being quite certain, I pulled his body over the grass and pushed it into the pond.

‘Then I ran back to Lucy, and told her that if ever she let out about my coming over that night I might swing for it; and after that at once made my way on foot the ten or eleven miles as quick as I could, back to my own cottage, where I got the middle of the night; and father nor no one else ever knew I hadn’t been at home that night. And when the police came to look me up the next day, it was all the same as usual, and I was at my work and about at the usual hour.

‘But I’ve never known a day or night of peace since. It wasn’t only that the gallows seemed always to be hanging, so to say, over my head: it was just as much to think that

an innocent man was suffering punishment for what I'd done. I was too big a coward to go and give myself up ; I felt sure they'd hang me.

‘ When I heard as they'd convicted Captain De Witt, and that he was sentenced to death, I did say to myself that I'd go, that I wouldn't let a man die for me. But then I heard they were getting up a petition to save his life, and to alter the sentence, and I said to myself that they would never hang a gentleman like that, and one who had so many friends up in the world. And when he got the commutation I held back again ; I said to myself it was better to be a convict for life like him, than to swing upon the gallows, as they'd be sure to make me do. But I wasn't ever happy for a day. And I thought to get away from where it all

happened, and to go to foreign parts, and maybe forget it if I could; and now the judgment's fallen upon me at last. I've been a coward, and murdered the living man more than I did the dead one; for the first I didn't mean to kill, but the second I did of a set purpose. And this is my true and full confession; and as I have spoken the truth, so may God show mercy upon my soul when I die.'

Mr. Carter finished the document without interruption. When he looked up Mr. Brereton sat motionless, his face buried in his hands; the girl was sitting upright, with clasped fingers and burning cheeks. There was a short silence as he folded it up; then he turned and spoke a few words of kindly and religious sympathy, to which the others listened in silence.

It was Nell who first spoke.

‘How long has he to live?’ she asked, referring to Barrett.

‘Not many hours, I should say. If your father intends to see him, the time is short. But,’ and he looked again towards the bent and shaking figure in the chair, ‘he is not fit, I fear.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘he had better not go; it will be too much for him. Papa,’ she said gently, as she bent over him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder,—it was the first time he had heard her call him so since De Witt’s arrest,—‘papa, do not try to go to the hospital. Let me go. I am much stronger for it than you. Mr. Carter will take me. I think one of us ought to go. He is dying.’

He lifted up a haggard face. ‘Yes, go; I cannot. I could not bear to meet him.’

She bent lower still.

‘ Papa, he is dying, he is penitent, he did not mean to do it ; may I tell him that you will try to forgive him ? ’

He groaned aloud.

‘ He murdered my boy, my poor boy ! But he is dying. God help me ! Yes ; tell him I forgive him. If God can forgive him, I must ! ’

Nell stooped again, and laid her hot lips to his forehead. She had not kissed him for twenty months ; and never before had she given him a kiss like this—tender, pitiful, and earnest. Then she turned, and saying simply, ‘ I am ready,’ followed the clergyman out of the room. Twenty minutes later she was standing with Mr. Carter in the hospital ward, by the bedside of James Barrett. The dying man’s face was deathly pale, and ever and anon contortions of intense physical pain crossed

his features ; but at sight of the visitor, a flush spread over it, and he turned eagerly towards her.

‘ Miss Nell ! Miss Nell ! ’ he said, ‘ it’s what I’ve prayed and hoped for, to see you. I can’t die easy till I’ve asked your pardon. I can’t think God will forgive me till you and the master say you do. And you wouldn’t come here to taunt me with my crimes, I know.’

She placed herself in the chair beside him.

‘ No, Jim, I could not come to taunt you. You have sinned, but you repent. May God forgive you, as I do, and your master.’

‘ Has he forgiven me, Miss Nell ? Did he say so ? Oh, I couldn’t go before my God without his forgiveness ! ’

‘ He forgives you fully, Jim. He hopes, as I do, that you may find mercy with God.’

‘ Oh, Miss Nell, how can you bear the

sight of me? I've done worse by you almost than by the master. But there have been seven devils in me ever since. I've often thought as I should go mad. And now it's God's justice that I should come to such an end. I'm glad it's happened so; indeed I am, Miss Nell. I was too big a coward to give myself up to swing for it; but now they'll let him go free, and I'm glad of it. I'd rather die than keep on as I was, murdering an innocent man. Miss Nell, I've been thinking all night, maybe this pain as I'm suffering will go a bit towards my account, to weigh against what I've done—'

'I pray God so, Jim.'

'Do you remember, Miss Nell, that day—last winter it was, when you met me in the avenue and questioned me, and seemed to read the heart within me? Do you remember what you said then as I should

feel upon my dying bed, if so be as I'd let an innocent man be convicted in my stead ? It's all true, Miss Nell, as true as gospel !'

'Barrett,' said the chaplain, 'we will say a prayer together.'

And together they knelt down, he and Nell, whilst silence reigned in the neighbouring beds, and James Barrett joined his weakly hands together. It was a prayer for mercy, for forgiveness ; and Nell, with the painful gasps of the dying man echoing close beside her, could pray it from her heart.

When she rose up a sweet light was shining in her eyes, the light of a pitiful mercy, and she laid her hand upon those of the young man.

'God bless and forgive you, Jim !' she said gently, in a low voice, and he caught her hand in his with a sob.

'Oh, Miss Nell, Miss Nell, will you ask

him to forgive me—him as I've wronged the most ?'

It was a beautiful face into which he looked so pleadingly, a face agitated by a new hope, a sweet compassion.

'I will, Jim.'

She was still holding his hand, and he was still gazing up into her face, as if searching there for the gate of heaven, when a sudden convulsion distorted the pale features.

'My poor old father,' he murmured, 'tell him not to fret about me—and Lucy, poor little maid—'

He stopped with a cry of mortal agony, and a greyiness came over his face, as Mr. Carter beckoned to the nurse, and led Nell hastily away.

But it was many hours before the terrible anguish of that sudden cry ceased to echo within Nell Lingwood's ears.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HONOURABLE JOHN IS HYSTERICAL.

‘Iddio non paga sempre il Sabato.’

ITALIAN PROVERB.

MRS. PONSONBY was busy making tea at the breakfast-table in her cosy little dining-room, and John Ponsonby was standing before the open window, whistling gently, and looking out with a glance of approbation upon the feeble rays of sunlight that struggled across the quiet Square, when the little housemaid—bought, as John always said, to match the house—entered and put a telegram into his hand.

The next moment Mrs. Ponsonby turned

round, tea-cup in hand, believing that her husband had taken leave of his senses.

‘John!’ she said, ‘what is the matter?’

John had given a wild view-halloo, after which he improvised a short but effective hornpipe; and then seizing the tea-cup out of her hand, flung it up in the air and caught it adroitly several times, still dancing round the room on one leg.

‘Oh, John, take care! Our pretty tea-cups! What has happened?’

‘I’ll tell you in one moment,’ he exclaimed. ‘But a kiss first, Judy!’

And taking her by the shoulders, he turned her towards him, and kissed her breath almost away.

‘Oh, John, John, do be quiet! Has any one left you ten thousand a year?’

‘Better, far better! Read that.’ And he placed the telegram before her.

It was from Nell at Liverpool, sent off first thing that morning.

‘James Barrett has made full confession of the murder. Mr. Brereton and I came last night. Can you possibly join us?’

‘What do you say to *that*, aye?’ he inquired. ‘Hip, hip, hooray, little woman!’

But Judith had turned pale, and for a moment she gazed at the paper and did not answer.

The news it contained seemed too good to be true. For a moment she was blind, deaf, and dumb, absorbed in realizing the changed condition of things; the next, her cheeks flushed scarlet, and tears of joy started to her eyes, as, involuntarily, she clasped her hands and looked upwards.

‘Oh, great God of heaven, I thank Thee!’ she exclaimed. And never was

thanksgiving ejaculation more true and earnest.

Then she flung herself into her husband's arms with a sob of joy.

'Oh, John, dear John, how good God is to us!'

'Well,' he said, 'I'm not going to contradict anything you choose to say just now, my dear. And you may give me another kiss, if you like. It seems to do me good—almost as much good as playing ball with the tea-cups. Hooray, old fellow—we'll soon have you out of that prison of yours! And as for that Barrett, *won't* I put on my best necktie to go and see him swung up?'

'Oh, hush, John! it is too awful a subject to joke about—'

'True, my dear; but you married me for better, for worse, you know—'

'And the worst part of you,' she said,

smiling, 'is your tendency to make jokes upon everything. John, I am so happy, I don't the least know what I am saying!'

'I'm sure I don't, Judy. But now, what time does the express leave? Ten o'clock. If I take a quick hansom, and a quicker breakfast, I can get to the station in lots of time. Run, little woman, and bundle a couple of shirts and socks into my travelling-bag for me. I mayn't be able to get back to-night.'

'Stop away as long as ever you like, John, if it will get Barrington out an hour sooner. Oh, my darling boy!'

And Mrs. Ponsonby flew to do her husband's behest with a radiant countenance. Twenty minutes later the hansom was at the door, and he was hurrying down to it.

'Judy,' he said, as he gave her a parting kiss, 'you never—no, never!—gave me to

understand before how maddeningly pretty you could be !’

‘Great joy makes every one look pretty they say, John. But don’t lose time.’

‘Do *I* look pretty ?’ he asked, twisting up his face into a monstrous contortion.

‘Oh, do be off, John ! I shall never feel content till you are off.’

‘There’s a loving wife !’

‘It’s so foolish to go on in this way before Mary Ann. I’m sure she is listening. How can you expect her to respect you ?’

‘My dear, I’ve a good mind to give her a kiss too ! I find nothing relieves my present excitement like embracing somebody. I hope there won’t be any decent-looking females in the same compartment with me going up to town ; I’m safe to kiss them !’

And John Ponsonby sprang into the hansom, and was out of sight in a moment.

The next day it was known all over England by those who cared to know, or who read the newspapers, that an innocent man had been convicted of the murder of Robert Brereton, and unjustly incarcerated for a period of nearly a year and three quarters ; and that the true murderer had made full and satisfactory confession of the crime the day before his death. Sensational particulars were of course given in many of the papers, describing the social position and former profession of the condemned man, and details of the accident which put an end to Barrett's life,—not to mention a touching account, in one or two, of the meeting between the released prisoner and his white-haired mother, with various other incidents of a like intimate and moving nature. It seemed like a judgment of Providence, one and all remarked, that the

murderer should be cut off at the very moment when he hoped to consolidate his own safety, and to clinch his double crime, by leaving the country where languished the unhappy man whom he had consigned to so cruel and unjust a fate.

It was a stirring story altogether, what with the sudden death of the guilty, and the social position of the innocent man; and there were perhaps few persons in the county at whose dinner-table it did not that day furnish a certain amount of discussion and animated conversation.

Of Nell fortunately there was no mention in the papers. Happily for her, and to the extreme satisfaction of Mrs. Brereton, the reporters had not lighted upon the fact of De Witt's intended marriage, or they doubtless would have made capital out of so interesting a detail.

Ponsonby's presence in Liverpool had been doubly useful, not only on account of the clear head and business knowledge which told him what steps must be taken officially upon the matter; but also in controlling and guiding Mr. Brereton, who seemed, what with agitation and nervousness, completely to have lost what little common-sense he ever possessed.

Every one readily placed matters in Ponsonby's hands; and, under his guidance, they all returned southwards that evening—Mr. Brereton and Nell to the Cedars, and he himself to town, to lay the deposition at once before the Home Secretary.

How the poor girl longed to accompany him instead of her father no words could say; how she yearned to be one of the first to congratulate her lover, to pour upon him all the treasure of the devotion that

had accumulated in her heart during all these sad and terrible months, no one but a woman in like position could guess ; but, if she could have wished to brave the absolute prohibition of her guardian and step-father, she could not but submit sorrowfully to John Ponsonby's decision.

‘Better not,’ he said. ‘Give him time to turn round and think. He will be in a whirl at first. The shock of recovered liberty will be almost as great as was the first shock. Let him be quiet a bit. If I can, I will get him to come to us. And then, after a while, if your guardian consents, you can come up too and meet him. Judith will write and tell you everything ; and you can write to him.’

And so it was settled ; and poor Nell, trying to restrain her yearning impatience, returned to the Cedars, to await the happy

telegram which should announce De Witt's liberation, a little relieved by the loving outpourings of a note which she had confided to Ponsonby to be given to him the earliest moment possible.

It was a long evening of waiting, and a sleepless night to Nell. She knew the telegram could not well reach her before ten or eleven o'clock, but it was terrible work sitting still or pacing up and down in a restlessness of suspense that soon became uncontrollable feverishness.

Mrs. Brereton's remarks were as so many mosquito stings to the girl in her present condition. She avowed, as was her duty to do, that she was very glad that justice was to be done at last, and that an innocent person was to be liberated; yet she seemed to have a secret feeling that De Witt had altogether behaved unfairly to them all

and that it would have been more seemly of him if, after matters had been quietly arranged, with the approval of most people, he had had the good taste to remain where he was, instead of returning to re-open an unpleasant subject.

‘It would be very awkward for them all,’ she said, quite fretfully. ‘What should they do if they ever happened to meet him again in society? Though probably he would have too much good sense to wish to enter into society again. She did not know whether people would exactly care to know him now. It was very sad for him, no doubt; but of course a man couldn’t expect, after nearly two years spent among the lowest dregs of society, to be thought the same of as before. She hoped no one would blame Mr. Brereton; he acted for the best. It would never do to let murderers roam

loose about the world, just because there might be the particle of a chance that somebody else had committed the crime. Would it be possible for Captain De Witt, she wondered, to bring an action against the magistrates? Oh, no, of course he couldn't! But he might make things very unpleasant for Mr. Brereton if he chose; he had a great many friends in good position.'

Nell could bear no more; and setting her teeth with anger, disgust, and shame, she fled from the room to her own little boudoir up-stairs. She had not been there many minutes when the maid, entering, handed her a card. It was Colonel Stewart's.

'He is in the dining-room, miss; he asked particularly for you.'

Nell's first impulse was to send down word that she could not see him; but with the second she rose from her chair, a flush

upon her cheeks, and descended to the dining-room.

The old Colonel was pacing up and down the room, hat in hand. At her entrance he paused and made her a bow, which she returned in silence. She had never spoken to him voluntarily, never taken his hand, since that day last year when he had ushered in the men who were to arrest De Witt ; and she did not offer to shake hands now.

‘Miss Lingwood,’ said the old man after a pause, ‘I have come to ask you to forgive me!’

The silence was unbroken, and the beautiful young face into which he looked was strangely hard and cold. Why was it so much easier to forgive James Barrett, the dying murderer, whose hands were stained with actual blood, than this handsome, kindly, courteous old gentleman, whose cruelty had been involuntary, and whose

lips had probably never before asked pardon of any human creature ?

‘I did you—and him—a cruel wrong,’ he continued sadly ; ‘but it was an error of judgment, Miss Lingwood, not of intention. You cannot regret it more now than I do.’

‘Had you never spoken to him, Colonel Stewart, had you never looked in his face and seen its expression, that you could believe such as him capable of murder? My stepfather was mad with grief about his son, but you—you were in full possession of your senses.’

‘I was not the only one mistaken, Miss Lingwood. The twelve jurymen all convicted him.’

‘They only judged by the evidence—they knew nothing of him personally.’

‘We magistrates are bound to go by evidence too. You would not have us go by feeling?’

‘Some of you would have little danger of that,’ she remarked bitterly.

He flushed to the roots of his grey hair.

‘Then you refuse to accept my regret, Miss Lingwood?’

‘What you have done to *me* I can easily forgive, Colonel Stewart. But can you give him back his ruined life?’

‘God forbid that it should be ruined! I never wish to sit upon the Bench again, for my part.’

She scarcely heard him. Her face was buried in her hands, and she was trembling all over.

‘Let us be thankful,’ she said, ‘you and I, Colonel Stewart, that at the last and most important judgment we shall stand before the bar of God, and not of man!’

When at length she raised her head he had left the room.

‘Colonel Stewart!’ she called feebly.

Already she began to repent her of her hardness. But as she spoke the hall door closed; and looking from the window, she saw him riding past, his eyes cast down, the grey head bowed upon his breast.

She had been cruel to the old man, and she knew it. Her love for Barrington had shown itself by the fierce emotions of the tigress, not the gentle spirit of the woman. And, great as was her joy when, half an hour later, the telegram was brought to her, announcing the freedom of the man she loved, yet, even that moment of supreme satisfaction would, she felt, have been the sweeter had not this little pang of self-reproach mingled with its happiness.

If joy was to make her hard-hearted, might not the judgment of renewed trouble fall upon her?

CHAPTER XII.

‘SHE IS TOO YOUNG TO JUDGE FOR HERSELF.’

‘This phantom is it whose persistence mars
The tender beauty of the summer hours,
Whose image blots from me the kindling stars,
And saddens all the splendour of the flowers.’

JOHN PAYNE.

A soft autumnal sun was flinging its long rays over the beautiful old-fashioned town of Hyères. In front it gleamed upon the pale surface of the distant sea, casting up the Iles d’Or upon a background of crimson, whilst behind it lay in a golden glory upon the ruins of the old castle crowning the conical hill that shelters the long line of neat white houses. A slight shower early in the morning had laid the dust upon the straight

white roads, and washed the noble palm-trees of their grey coating ; the light breeze that blew was heavy with the scent of the late October roses, and the birds sang with fervour in the red and yellow-tinted trees.

It was a lovely and a peaceful scene—an autumnal day that forgot its date, and breathed only the tender regrets of a fading summer. There could not be many more such surely, even in this sunny, flowery, favoured land. It was a day to poetize, to make love, to dream day-dreams ; a day to lie beneath the blue sky and give thanks simply for existence amid surroundings so perfect, so peaceful.

The hotel garden was a beautiful and an extensive one, but at the present moment it was nearly empty ; one person only occupied the furthest bench placed to command the far-spreading view this lovely evening.

The season was yet early, and the house by no means full; and in this fine weather many visitors elected to make long excursions to the neighbouring lions.

The man who sat beneath the trees, looking out upon the three-miles-off sea, was half reclining on the iron bench, over which one arm fell listlessly. He was both young and good-looking, but his hair about the ears was tinged with grey. His fair complexion was very sunburnt, and his hands, although well-made and the hands of a gentleman, were brown as mahogany. A strange, stern expression pervaded his face, and the blue eyes were characterized by a mingled look of defiance and of sadness.

Barrington—for it was he—had been here about a week, and already he was thinking of moving on. His restlessness made him incapable of remaining long in

any one place. He was in truth vainly seeking to leave behind him a burden that had become by degrees part of his very self. At each fresh move he said to himself he would be able to cast it off, in some measure at any rate—and lo ! there he always found it waiting for him on his arrival. He had thought, when in prison, that freedom was the one thing for which he yearned ; that liberty to go where he would, to do as he would, to think as he would, unquestioned and unwatched, was almost all that was absolutely necessary to happiness ; but now he found that he had been mistaken, that a life which has been once rudely severed, as it were, in two by some great moral earthquake, cannot at will resume its former self-control, its former ways of thought, of action, of enjoyment.

The taste of a bitter potion, even when

the potion itself is swallowed down, does not at once leave the palate. For a long time it prevents the power of tasting other condiments. So it seemed morally to Barrington; it seemed to him that he had lost the power of enjoyment, the power of being happy or even contented, that he had no strength to shake himself out of the lethargy of the past despair. Even the beauty of the outside world had little effect upon this sad and restless apathy; the beauty of earth and sea and sky seemed all the more cruel to a man whose aims in life had all been shattered so utterly and for ever, as he thought. All the old grooves had been broken down, the old hopes swept away by that convulsion, and he had no energy to re-construct anew. Barely thirty years of age, De Witt felt himself an old man.

Silently now, seated alone upon the shady bench, he reviewed the past few weeks. How kind every one had been to him ; and yet, it was terrible to feel, how unavailing had all the kindness been to heal his smarting wounds—the wounds of a broken self-respect, of bitter memories, of a marred life. In prison he had allowed himself to think of Nell, to pray for her, to recall her loving smile, her tender words ; he might do it then, because she was as far removed from him as the angels, and he could never hope to see her again, nor could he injure her by his love ; but now—now that he was once more a free man and acknowledged innocent—he must put her away even from his very thoughts, lest they should get the better of him ; now, if he really loved her, he must avoid her, try to forget her, teach her to forget him.

Never would he take a selfish advantage of so noble and generous a nature. She was ready to give him, now as before, all the rich treasure of her love and confidence—not even a conscious thought of self-sacrifice marred the beauty of her unselfish yearnings ; so all the more must he be the one to renounce, the one to break the thin cord that still connected him with this world's happiness, and drift apart—for her sake. For her sake ! She should not devote her rich young life to one saddened and embittered like his ; she should never be placed as his wife in a position that might bring upon her the undreamt-of pangs of cruel comment or slanderous sneer. How hard it had been to answer her little loving note—to answer it rightly, and to quench, with a few carefully thought-out words, all the flow of her joyful, expectant heart ! Bitter it had been,

the bitterest experience even of his life ; but it was done, and he knew that he was right. For her sake ! In that short response of his he had, with his own hand, snuffed out his last hope, plunged himself voluntarily into the darkness of unmixed gloom.

Ponsonby had met him at the very prison gates, and brought him to his own house ; he and his wife devoting themselves, like the good Samaritan in the Bible, to the work of uplifting the down-trodden man, and pouring balm upon his wounds.

For a while De Witt had been silent and submissive, with the shock of the unexpected deliverance full upon him ; but he soon grew restless.

‘Do not try to make me stop,’ he said almost pleadingly to John Ponsonby. ‘I am best alone for a bit.’

Very reluctant were both the two to part with him. He should have his sitting-room to himself alone if he liked, they said. He could have his meals alone, if he would only stay! But at last they were convinced that their affectionate kindness was a cruelty, and they let him go. They acknowledged to one another that he was right, that he would be best alone for a while, until he had somewhat recovered his balance of mind—until he could, as it were, re-arrange his thoughts and his life; and by degrees return, by the sight of men and things, by the brisk, busy sounds of the outer world, and the old accustomed refinements and ways of existence, to something of his former self.

They did not know what answer he had sent to the note which Nell had written and Ponsonby had delivered; but they saw

that, for some reason or other, it had added to rather than detracted from his habitual silent sadness.

It was almost more than Judith Ponsonby could bear to see this bright, merry nephew of old, always her playmate and companion in every joke and whim, so terribly changed. Was the brightness scorched out of him for ever, or only for a time, by the furnace of his undeserved trouble?

But she was too unselfish to try to keep him when she saw that he longed to be alone.

‘Some day when I’m brighter I’ll come and see you again, Aunt Judy,’ he said, in answer to her distressed looks. ‘One wants a little time to shake this sort of thing off, you know, and one does it best by oneself. I’m too stupid just now to bore any one.’

‘You will never be stupid to me or to John, dear Barrington.’

‘You are the best and kindest of women, Aunt Judith, and Ponsonby is as good as a fellow can be. I never can thank you both enough for all you’ve done ^{for} and been ^{to} for me.’

‘It was nothing we did, dear—only what we *must* have done. But if we could only restore some of your old happiness to you—’

‘Don’t fret about that—it will come, no doubt, in time; and if it doesn’t, it isn’t of much account. Things are a little ^{rough} stiff just now—perhaps they will wear smoother.’

‘God grant it, dear old boy. Oh, Barry, I *must* ask—is it all over between you and poor Nell? Will it never come on again?’

‘It is all over between us; it will never come on again.’

‘Yet she loves you so, Barrington! I believe it will break her heart.’

She knew she was foolish, perhaps wrong in saying this; but her woman’s tender pity would speak out the truth and be heard.

Yet she half regretted when she saw the deepening lines upon his brow, and the repressed pain about the stern mouth.

‘She will have to suffer,’ he muttered; ‘but it is better so—it must be so.’

And he turned away abruptly, unable to bear the gaze of even her loving, sympathetic eyes.

This conversation had occurred during those first two or three days when he had kept Nell’s letter by him, reading and re-reading it every few hours, and trying to brace himself up to the answering of it. He had fully made up his mind before then

as to his course of action, but he felt the effort to put it into execution too great at first.

But the second day he received a letter—from Mrs. Brereton—which made him knit his brows and set his lips together more tightly than usual, and which braced him up to the work he had to do. It was a rambling rigmarole, characteristic of the somewhat feeble mind of the writer, in which she threw herself, so to speak, upon the mercy of Captain De Witt.

She had but just discovered, she said, the perverse madness of her daughter in thinking of reviving the old connection with Barrington, or, at any rate, of corresponding with him. Her guardian, Mr. Brereton, would of course never consent to her re-engagement, and had forbidden her to correspond or to renew the acquaintance ;

and so long as she was a minor, she was completely beneath his control.

‘Under the circumstances, I think even you, Captain De Witt, can scarcely say that he is not acting rightly. She is as yet too young to be able to judge for herself on a point so important to her future welfare. No one can be more sorry, or regret more deeply than my husband and myself, that you should have been the victim of so terrible a mistake ; but mistakes the most fatal will occasionally happen in this world, without any one being to blame for them ; and one can but act according to circumstances, even if it bears hardly upon those who are not personally to blame. I therefore appeal to you as a man of honour and a gentleman. I do not know if you still entertain the regard you formerly professed for my daughter ; but if so, you surely will not

be showing it by tempting her to defy her lawful and natural guardians, or inducing her to renew an intimacy which can never be for her happiness. She is, you know, impulsive to a fault, and cares little how imprudent she may be when she has once taken a thing into her head. I appeal to you, therefore, in kindness to her rather than to oblige me, not to encourage her wilful inclinations, but yourself to put a stop to the correspondence she was so mad as to commence.'

Truly, Mrs. Brereton had no lack of confidence in his generosity, no small faith in the unselfishness of the released convict! And when she knew, as well as he did, that in a few more months her daughter would be of age and a free agent!

But his judgment agreed with her conclusions, though his heart revolted from her cold and calculating premises.

Mrs. Brereton received no answer to her letter, but one reached Nell the next morning.

‘Dearest,’ it said, ‘this must be the last time we write to each other. No one but you could have written what you did to me two days ago. I am not ungrateful, Nell,—I shall never forget that letter, I will never part with it,—but it is because you are too generous to think for yourself that I must think for you. We must part—we *are* parted, Nell. Think no more of me—be dead to me; you cannot do me a greater service than by trying to forget me. I will never ruin your life by uniting it with mine. Do not answer this; let us spare ourselves needless pain. God bless you now and for ever. B. D. W.’

And the girl who received and read that letter sat gazing at it blankly, incredulously,

without sound or movement, like one paralyzed. Better for her, she said to herself, in the bitterness of that first moment, if he had died—even the death of the criminal; for then he would have died with her name upon his lips, the love of her within his heart! And now he told her to forget! To forget! Oh, God! forgive him the cruel words that brought a stab so deep to her heart—that *he* should tell her to forget, that he should wish it, think it possible for her! Now indeed she recognized that amid the very deeps of grief may yet lie more unfathomable depths of pain.

But to him all this was unknown; and, wrestling hard to carry out his cruel duty to its end, he had no suspicion that the weapon his own hand had wielded had struck most sharply home to the girl he loved.

That same afternoon Sir Simon called. He could not refuse to see his cousin ; but the demonstrative affection, the excited joy, the congratulations of the kindly Baronet were almost more than he could bear. After a tension such as he had undergone a man's nerves become weak, and he felt that one or two more such ordeals would go far to drive him out of his senses. He had none of the spirit of cheerful hopefulness displayed by his cousin, and for the moment felt himself in too stunned a condition to reciprocate the friendly smiles, or be grateful for the words of sympathy expressed by the other. The next morning he took his departure from the Ponsonbys' hospitable home, and established himself in lodgings in a somewhat out-of-the-way part of town, by this means hoping to avoid other visitors.

One call there was he must pay before leaving the country—and that was on Geoffrey Rainsford's widow. He felt none of the constraint and repulsion on meeting her with which the sight of others filled him. She had indeed been part and parcel of his prison life and thoughts; and she had a sorrow of her own too great to fear that she would want to offer him a burdensome but well-meant sympathy.

Between them lay the silent bond of love for the same man—poor Geoffrey, who had died in his arms, and who, in happier days, had so often lain in hers.

Never had his own troubles moved him so much as when he sat in the dingy little London lodging, telling the weeping widowed girl every detail he could recollect of her dead husband, and mingling comfort as best he could amid his sad story. But

her best comfort was the thought of the friend whose presence had kept the death-bed of her darling from being one of utter loneliness and sordid harshness.

‘You were like a brother to him—God for ever bless you!’ she wept.

‘I loved him,’ said De Witt simply; and at the words she bent and kissed his hands, her hot tears falling over them.

He returned home, soothed and softened. For the sake of Geoffrey’s widow, he might perhaps have reconciled himself to a short stay in town; but the next morning his determination altered.

A former fellow officer, who had some slight acquaintance with Ponsonby, obtained knowledge of his whereabouts, and spent an hour the next day in visiting De Witt—who could not well deny himself—in condoling with him in his abominable treatment and

cruel hard luck, and in pressing upon him every form of friendliness and of proffered hospitality that a good-natured but rather shallow brain could devise. This visit would undoubtedly, Barrington felt, be the precursor of a score of others. All well-meaning, kindly, and tactless acquaintances would feel it their duty now to come and sit upon his case, to talk over his experiences, to abuse his judges, and sympathize with himself—to make a pitiful and battered lion of him, in fact. It was more than he could bear. Perhaps he ought to have felt more gratitude to these friends : he tried to do so, but his heart was too sore to be able as yet to make his terrible experiences the subject of promiscuous conversation, or even to bear the offered condolences ; and he fled the place, to the relief of his landlady, who had some private suspicions of his sanity,

and who openly (down-stairs) disapproved of a lodger so taciturn and grave, and who spent so much of his time in an unnatural and gloomy seclusion.

The next morning De Witt dropped a letter into the post-box, informing Ponsonby that he was going abroad for a few months, and that his solicitor, or banker, would be informed every now and then of his address—and an hour later was in the express on his way to Dover.

That night found him in Paris, the next at Marseilles, and the day after at Hyères. Why he had chosen Hyères he knew not. He had heard it was a pretty spot, and he fancied it might be a quiet one. Perhaps there he could be to himself for a while—perhaps there he might be safe not to meet any one who had known him in the old days, that seemed now to belong to another man's life.

And so he found it on the whole. The hotel was uncrowded, the peasantry were civil and kindly, and he seemed at last alone, free to roam all day along the bare green plain that ran between the sea and town, or to ramble into shady, many-coloured woods upon the hill-sides—walking alone, feeding alone, living alone, and by degrees entering into that calmer frame of mind which he hoped might be the forerunner of a return to life and energy and hope. But it was a process that worked slowly, and as yet had scarcely begun to make itself felt. Even yet he had scarcely got rid of the feeling of being watched, the expectation of being followed, of the nightmare of slavery—he could scarcely as yet realize that he was once more a man, no longer a chattel.

This afternoon he seemed more than usual a prey to apathetic sadness, as he sat, his

eyes fixed upon the ground, his limbs motionless, like one absorbed in a painful dream. Suddenly, however, he started and raised his head. The sound of little footsteps were heard upon the gravel-walk behind him, and, as they paused, a baby voice accosted him. Involuntarily he smiled ; he had a natural love of children. Was not, he sometimes thought to himself, the absence of innocent childish faces, of the sound of sweet childish voices, possibly as powerful a factor even as the prevalence of criminal nature in the creation of that atmosphere of crude brutality so perceptible in a convict establishment ? Was it not the eradication of one of the few softening or refining influences which might yet have power here and there to act upon depraved minds ?

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO TENDER HEARTS.

‘No, never more may we smile, as thou
Sheddest round smiles from thy sunny brow ;
Yet something it is in our hearts to shrine
A memory of beauty undimmed as thine !’

MRS. HEMANS.

SHE was a little yellow-haired, blue-eyed child of three, whose hands were full of scarlet leaves and golden blossoms.

‘I’ve got bouful flowers for you,’ she said confidentially, climbing up to him with a laborious stretch of her little legs. ‘Look ! isn’t they nice ?’

She was his one friend in the hotel. The first day of his arrival they had met upon

the stairs and exchanged smiles ; and since that date she had never seen him without running to meet him joyously. She was a thorough little coquette, and Barrington's grave face, instead of repelling, seemed to attract her baby-love and attentions.

She squatted herself down beside him now, and began to pick out her brightest coloured leaves.

‘Take off oo’s hat,’ she commanded imperiously ; and he laid it beside him upon the bench, watching her with quiet eyes as she bent over him, dropping a spray here and there across his brown hair, her face intent with the seriousness of her occupation.

‘There !’ she remarked presently, drawing a little back from him to contemplate the effect of her handiwork—‘oo’s pitty now !’ And she smiled admiringly.

His arm had been round her for some

moments to lend protection to her elevated position, and he drew her towards him suddenly and kissed her passionately.

‘ I likes you,’ she said softly, as she put a little hand round his neck and pressed her smooth cheek to his ; ‘ does you like *me* ?’

He nodded assent.

‘ Velly much ?’ asked the little fairy.

‘ Velly much.’ And for a moment the old bright smile lit up his features and transformed their sadness.

She looked at him earnestly out of her blue eyes ; with the close observation of a feminine nature, she had noticed the transfiguring beam.

‘ Now,’ she said triumphantly, ‘ you looks pittier than ever ! Why doesn’t you always look like that ?’

‘ Muriel, come here !’ called an authoritative voice behind them ; and De Witt

started and dropped his arm from about the little creature.

‘Come down, Muriel!’ repeated the voice more sharply; and the child obeyed in silence, leaving her treasures on his lap. He had perhaps remarkable powers of hearing; at any rate he could not help overhearing the next few words, spoken by the mother of his little friend to her companion.

‘That dreadful man, Edith! She is always going to him. Somehow he gives me the impression of some one who has committed a horrid crime, and is afraid of being found out. He slinks about by himself all day—’

Barrington sat motionless until they had passed out of sight and hearing; then he rose and shook off the petals left by baby hands.

‘Is, then,’ he asked himself with bitterness, ‘the mark of Cain so plainly branded

on my brow that I bear a guilty look to every one ?’

He passed through the hotel gates and turned his face towards the sea. It was as yet barely five o’clock ; he would have plenty of time for a long stroll before the general six o’clock *table-d’hôte* was over, and his own dinner laid out at its conclusion.

It was quite dark by the time he returned—a quiet, peaceful night, with the feeble rays of a young moon struggling through a bank of silver clouds. He had walked far, and felt the better for it ; and his solitary dinner eaten, he lit a cigar and strolled out upon the balcony which ran along the house. The young moon had gone behind a cloud, and it was quite dark as he paced slowly to the further end and stood leaning over the stone balustrade,

looking out into the night. His cigar was still in his hand, and had gone out. He was wondering whither he should go upon the morrow. He had told them before dinner that he must depart in the morning; but he had not as yet settled upon his destination. Bordighera should it be?

At this moment he heard a faint rustling beside him, like that made by a woman's dress, and turning sharply, perceived a figure seated in the corner of the stonework just beyond him. As he turned she rose, and the moon at the same moment reappearing, he recognized a lady who had apparently been some time in the hotel, and with whom he had, since his arrival, formed a sort of quasi-involuntary acquaintance. Once he had restored to her in silence a glove which she had dropped upon the garden walk, and once or twice he had

drawn back and opened the hall door for her when he found that they were about to issue together. Each time she had thanked him with a smile ; and more than once the last day or two she had, on meeting him casually, addressed to him a word of greeting or a general remark. Had he not been too pre-occupied to notice it, he might also have perceived that on each occasion she observed him more closely and with a greater interest. She was a woman no longer very young, but handsome and attractive.

He bowed, and was about to move off, when she addressed him abruptly.

‘Don’t let me drive you away,’ she said. ‘I was just going indoors.’

There was a pause.

‘It is a lovely night,’ he said at length, as she did not move.

‘Yes, lovely ; we are having a late

summer.' She seemed to speak with an embarrassment which attracted even his attention. Suddenly she made a movement towards him, and broke out in tones of real emotion: 'I must speak to you! Will you ever forgive me?'

The moon was now fully out, and as he glanced towards her in a dull surprise, he saw that her face was full of earnestness, and that her lips trembled in the pale half-light.

'Forgive you for what?' he asked.

'I *must* say it. If it is wrong or unwomanly or impertinent you must tell me, and not spare me, Captain Watson!' (This was the name which De Witt—nervously shrinking from comment or notice, and fearful of the publicity given by the newspapers to his late release from prison and the whole sensational story—had adopted as an

incognito on his travels.) ‘But I have noticed it from the first day you came, and I cannot bear to see any one look so. Why do you seem so terribly sad? Can I do anything to help you?’

‘You?’

‘Yes—I. Perhaps you think me mad to talk in this way to you—perhaps you are angry with me; but I have so longed to help you—’

‘You are very good—’

‘Oh, don’t speak to me in that tone! I mean it kindly. Forgive me!’

‘I am sure you do. I have nothing to forgive. But we are strangers one to another.’

‘Strangers are sometimes able to help each other. I am rich and well born, and perhaps clever. I cannot bear to see any one suffer so!’

‘How do you know that I suffer?’

‘How do I know?—because I have not had a happy life myself, and I can read the signs of suffering in others.’

There was a pause; and as he once more glanced at her upturned face, he saw tears gleaming in the dark eyes.

‘You cannot help me,’ he said gravely.

‘Not in any way?’

‘Not in any way—neither you nor any one else. We must bear our own burdens, each one of us.’

‘I had no right to speak to you; it was forward of me; but yet—’

‘It was kind and good and womanly of you.’

‘I have only made your trouble worse with bringing it forward. But—it was very foolish of me—I thought perhaps it might be a different sort of trouble. Though I am

rich, I never seem to do any good in the world. And now I have only done mischief, and made it worse for you to bear.'

'You have made it, if possible, better.'

He took her outstretched hand in his and held it for a moment. Her tears were dropping fast as he released it.

'Good night,' he said quietly. 'God bless you for your kind intentions.' And, as she moved indoors, he turned to pace the moon-lit balcony.

Had she known the nature of his past troubles, would she have proffered him the same warm sympathy? he asked himself; or would she instinctively have recoiled from one who had spent the last eighteen months of his life in the company of thieves and forgers and murderers? Yet the strange, unconventional offering of womanly tenderness had done its work in

laying a temporary balm upon the smarting sore of his wounded self-respect.

The next morning early De Witt was on his way to Bordighera. He never met again with the woman who desired to be his friend, he never even heard her name. Yet he often thought of her, sometimes with a smile upon his lips, but it was a tender smile. ‘She was rich, and yet she seemed able to do so little good to any one.’ Poor generous, eccentric soul ! Might her soft heart never fall a prey to the self-interested calculations of an ignoble spirit !

CHAPTER XIV.

DELILAH'S WILES.

‘A woman is a foreign land,
Of which, though there he settle young,
A man will ne’er quite understand
The customs, politics, and tongue.’

COVENTRY PATMORE.

‘JOHN,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby, ‘I want to talk to you seriously.’

‘Is a man ever so serious as when he is shaving? A smile might cost him his life!’

‘There’s half an hour still to dinner-time. When you’ve done, John, sit down here, please, and listen to me.’

‘What’s up *now*?’ asked Ponsonby, as

he wiped his last razor, and obediently took the seat pointed out to him. 'Have any more of my wife's connections been taken up for murder?'

'Oh, John, it's no joking matter! Don't you think Nell dreadfully changed this time?'

'I think her looking ill.'

'And miserable, John—utterly miserable.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Well, John, after you were gone this morning I persuaded her to come with me to see Dr. C——. You know how first-rate he is. Her looks frightened me. She didn't want to go, poor girl. She looked at me with those poor hollow eyes of hers, and said, "Why, what good can he do me, Judith?" and nearly upset me; but she is so good and submissive that she gave

way directly I pressed her. And what do you think was the first thing he asked me? Whether any of her family had died of consumption! I'm sure he thinks her in a decline, John. He said she must have as much change of air and scene as possible, and be out in the open air all day when fine. He recommended going abroad. How can she be out all day here in London in December, in the fogs and sleet?'

'Not very feasible, certainly,' said Ponsonby.

'And it wouldn't be much better at the Cedars. They have six or seven inches of snow down there.'

'Pleasant,' he remarked, laconically.

'But, John, it isn't open air or change of scene that will ever cure poor Nell. She has a breaking heart—that's her disease, John, nothing else; and I believe it will kill her.'

He sat silent, rubbing his eyebrow thoughtfully.

‘I do believe it will be her death, if none of us can help her. Oh, what blind madmen men are! I suppose Barrington thinks he is doing her a kindness in keeping away from her?’

‘Most people would say he was right.’

‘Because most people have very little heart. But he has a heart, and he really cares for her! He can’t surely know he is killing her! She said to me yesterday, “I never quite lost heart all through that dreadful time when he was in prison, he seemed still to belong to me in spirit; even if he had died, he would have died caring for me. But now he seems to have cast me off; we seem really separated for ever.” Oh, John, you men don’t know how we women can love! What is want of money, or

trouble, or even loss of position, when a woman cares for any one? She doesn't even think of it!'

'So the man must think for her, if he is worth a penny.'

'You don't really think so. Don't you believe it would be better for poor Nell to be married to Barrington than to be slowly breaking her heart for him this way?'

'If I did, Judy, I don't see how I could help her.'

'No. John, do you know where Barrington is now?'

'Not exactly. Somewhere in Switzerland, I believe, or Italy.'

'Couldn't you find out from his bankers or solicitor?'

'I dare say I might, if I wanted to know.'

'Well—I want to know.'

'Why? To write to him?'

‘ Perhaps. John, dear John, I am going to ask a favour of you ! ’

‘ Of course you are, or you wouldn’t kiss me ! ’

‘ Dear John, will you let me take her abroad ? ’

‘ Why can’t her own mother take her ? ’

‘ I could do her more good, John. I understand her better. ’

‘ No doubt you do. And you understand plotting better too. What game are you up to, Judy ? What has given you that becoming little flush ? You are not thinking of giving chase to Barrington, are you ? ’

‘ Oh, John, if they *did* meet—by accident, you know—everything would come all right at once. He is in his heart as miserable almost for her as she for him, and he could not keep up his high-flown ideas of self-sacrifice if once he saw her. ’

‘Oh, indeed! And how are you going to make them meet—by accident?’

‘I don’t know. You know it is the doctor’s orders, and I think I could get the Breretons to consent. I want to go at once—very soon.’

‘And leave me alone here?’

‘You could join us for the Christmas vacation. Dearest, you and I don’t need to tell each other some things. I think you can guess how I shall hate being away from you; but I would do more than that to make two miserable people happy.’

‘And suppose you fail?’

‘It *can’t* fail!’

‘Her guardian has forbidden her to have any intercourse with De Witt, Judith. This is the second time you have asked me to lend my countenance to an illegal proceeding.’

‘And aren’t you glad when you think of the first time?’

‘Not at all. I am desperately ashamed when I think of it!’

‘You would never have had me for your wife if you hadn’t done it, John. I should have detested you if you had refused!’

‘Well, every man makes a fool of himself when he is in love, I suppose. But once is enough.’

‘No, it isn’t, John. Once, nor one dozen times isn’t enough to do an act of kindness. You will go on doing it all your life, whether legal or illegal. The lawyer will never destroy the man in you, John. Besides, you know you’re in love with me still!’

‘In a few months she will be of age and her own mistress; she can wait till then, surely.’

‘By then she may be in her grave, John. Look at her face when you go down this evening, it is growing like a mask—so transparent; I cannot sit opposite to her all day, and do nothing. John, don’t you care? You do, I know!’

‘I care very much,’ he said slowly. ‘But I wish you would not ask me to go against lawful authority. It is a sort of underhand thing to do, it seems to me.’

‘John, I will write and tell Mr. and Mrs. Brereton what the doctor says. I know her mother loves her, and would not wish her to die. And she always liked poor Barrington too—till that mean wretch, her husband, turned her against him. His legal authority will cease in three or four months; and he has no moral authority, even you will admit—a contemptible creature like that, who would object to Barrington on

the score of the humiliation which he himself has unjustly brought upon him. Could meanness go further? You don't stick up for him, surely?'

'Personally,' said John, calmly, 'I look upon him as a brainless little toad.'

'Then, John, darling John, you give way—you won't prevent me? No one shall ever know the meeting was not by accident.'

'All women are deceitful, without exception,' he remarked.

'This is a noble deceit—a manœuvre to put a stop to the misery of two generous, loving people.'

'Well, don't ask my consent, Judy. You must go your own way. Never quote my concurrence, for I don't give it. I've simply got a wife that I can't keep in order. She defies me. It's easier to put on the noose than to slip it off!'

‘Oh, John, you are such a darling!’

‘Yes. And soon it will be “The guardians be upon thee, John!” I suppose Delilah was a smooth-tongued woman!’

‘We shall be too late for dinner, John. Be quick!’

‘Oh, so you can afford to think of that now you’ve gained your point, can you? Do you think *I* haven’t been famishing the last hour?’

‘And, John, dear, good old John, please find out that address as soon as you can, won’t you? You haven’t half shaved, dear—your cheeks are quite bristly yet!’

CHAPTER XV.

NEARLY LOST.

‘ And to his eye
There was but one beloved face on earth,
And that was shining on him.’—BYRON.

‘ *Hotel—Lucerne. Dec. 21st.*

‘ DEAREST JOHN,

‘ It is horrible your being prevented joining us! I do hope your father’s gout will soon be better, so that you can come in a few days. Give him my kindest love. Does he think me a brute for going away and leaving you at Christmas time? If he knew what I felt about it I don’t think he would. The truth is, my heart is beginning to fail me, dear. I didn’t like to come straight to Lucerne, you know, because I wanted to come upon Barrington

by accident ; and now I think he must have left the place. We have been here three days, and though I have inquired at the hotels, I can't hear anything of him.

‘I am beginning to wonder if I had better have stayed at home ; for change of scene doesn't seem to do poor Nell much good so far. But I console myself with remembering the doctor recommended it ; and when I look at the poor girl's pale, patient face, I feel I am a selfish wretch for thinking of myself or you. She seems stronger in some ways since we came out, and often surprises me by the long solitary walks she takes over the mountains. But I think it is in order to be alone. Poor child, she seems to dread the effort of speaking, even to me. She answers everything with the same sweet, weary smile which goes to my heart. She is out now, having done me up with a long morning's tramp through the heavy snow. This place makes one shudder to-day—one can scarcely realize its brilliant, smiling, summer beauty. The lake is a grey, opaque mass, the sky

like lead, and the great range of snow-covered mountains opposite us have a like forbidding greyness about them. Mount Pilatus has his nightcap on, which means rain and storm, they say,' &c., &c.

* * * * *

Whilst Judith Ponsonby sat in the little private sitting-room in their hotel, before the fire, inditing this epistle to her husband, the girl who formed her chief topic was wandering up the steep hill-side above the town, regardless of the threatening look of sky and lake. Waif was at her heels; for Nell had brought her faithful companion abroad with her, and the two were never separate. She walked on unwearingly, or if she was weary, she did not notice it; for, delicate as the girl looked, there was a feverish physical energy about her at times that would have exhausted the walking powers of most of her sex.

She did not pause till she had gained a considerable height, from whence she looked down on town and bridge, and lake and church. The path had grown narrower and narrower, more and more obstructed by snow ; but it was one of the local points of view most patronized, and in fine weather considered an easy and pleasant excursion. Even to-day one or two pedestrians of a sturdy nature had passed her on the route, coming down as she went up.

She was not far from the summit now, but her strength suddenly failed her, and turning aside from the path, she crossed the half-hardened snow to where a boulder of rock showed through the monotony of the white surface ; and sat down to rest. The air was cold and frosty, but she was for a time warmed by her quick exercise, and did not notice its chilliness. Her eyes

rested vaguely on the wide grey stretch of the waters beneath her feet ; but her mind was in a reverie, and she saw nothing—not even the heavy flakes of snow that begun to fall all around her, silently, rapidly.

When at length she did observe them she still sat motionless for a while. A sort of mental apathy had fallen upon her. Why should she not stay quietly there and die out in the still calm snow and night air ? It was growing very cold, and her feet and hands ached dully, but that would soon be over ; and what was a little ache like this to the bitter pain that rested not, day or night, at her heart's core ? Was it her duty to rise up and go home, to carry on the heavy, hard struggle any longer ? Was it wicked to die ? Oh ! why must she go on living ? She had tried, oh, so hard, to bear her pain, to do

her duty! Would the struggle go on for ever? Might she not lay her burden down at last? Her death would hurt no one. She was so tired, so deathly tired! Had God no pity on her?

A soft warm tongue licked her wrist, and Waif whined and pulled softly at her dress. His sensible dog-brain saw the danger of the deepening night, the falling snow, the lowering barometer—and he warned his mistress.

She got up and looked about her, then turned towards the direction of the pathway up which she had ascended. But it was completely obliterated now; not a sign upon the untrodden, newly-fallen snow marked where it lay concealed. It was nearly dark, and at each step she only plunged more helplessly into the half-frozen snow. Was her prayer to be realized?—and was she in truth to lose her life to-night,

amid the unlit yet gleaming fields of treacherous snow ?

She raised her voice and called aloud for help ; whilst Waif, after a few moments of indecision, left her, bounding down the white hillside. She knew he had not deserted her basely, she knew her companion had gone to look for help. The best thing to do was to stand still until he returned, if such a thing were possible ; *he* was not likely to lose his way, and would come back to her sooner or later with assistance—even if too late. But, whilst she paused, half embedded in the snow, protected a little by the lee of a friendly rock, she fancied she saw a human figure coming down the hill, and called once more.

A voice immediately answered hers ; and the same moment Waif came bounding up again and fell upon the moving shadow with wildest protestations of joy.

Nell watched without speaking, and her heart seemed to stand still.

‘Where are you?’ called the voice,—a strange, husky voice, that she scarcely recognized,—and she called again.

In another moment he had sprang with long strides across the snow, and stood beside her.

For one short minute neither of them spoke. During that swift minute each perhaps reviewed the love and pain of the two last years in the light of the speechless joy of an unexpected meeting.

He was the first to speak; and as he did so, the momentary light that had shone in his face died away.

‘Nell!’ he said in a low voice, ‘Nell, is it you?’

‘Barrington,’ she said, with trembling lips, and as she spoke she crept nearer to him,

‘Barrington, you will not ask me to forget you now ? You will not try to forget me again ?’

A spasm passed across his face.

‘Nell, what can I say ? I must take you home, dear. It is dark and cold for you.’

‘I will not go home, Barrington, if you are going to leave me again. I will lie down and die here.’

‘Nell,’ he said hoarsely, ‘you are mad. Why do you ask me to injure you ?’

‘Have you ceased to love me, Barrington ?’

‘Ceased to love you, my darling ! God knows how my heart has yearned for you !’

‘Then why do you give me up ? I shall die without you, Barrington.’ And in the waning light she lifted her haggard eyes to his. ‘I have grown thin and worn and old, Barrington—I am not pretty now ; but it is because of my sorrow. And they say I shall not live long. Will you let me die ?’

‘Oh, my God!’ he exclaimed; and he buried his face in his hands.

Something warm crept up his shoulder, and lay upon his neck. It was one of her small gloved hands.

‘Don’t cast me off, dear Barrington,’ she said softly. ‘Perhaps I ought to be too proud to say it; but I have no pride left.’

‘It was all for your sake, Nell. Do you think I have not suffered? It was the one joy left to me in life.’

‘We will not mind the past now, Barrington; we will never part again.’

She crept closer again to him. And suddenly his arms opened, and with a suppressed sob he caught her in them, pressing her to him again and again, with all the fierce hunger of a long-famished love. Passionately he kissed her cold white face, her trembling lips, her two hands; the

long-repressed yearning, now at last indulged, seemed almost to overpower him.

But suddenly he glanced round him with a startled look. Darkness had fallen, and the snow was dropping more heavily than ever. The lights of the town twinkled far below, and their way homewards was toilsome and uncertain.

With Nell clinging to his arm, he turned quickly and made his way across the slope in the direction he believed and hoped the path should lie.

She toiled on beside him bravely, but it was terrible work, and he could do but little to assist her beyond the support of his arm ; and by degrees her steps flagged, and she hung heavily upon him.

Presently she stopped, gasping.

‘I cannot go on, Barrington. I have no more strength.’

He paused with an altered face.

‘We *must* go on, Nell!’

‘Can we not sit down on the snow for a few minutes, only a few minutes, dear Barrington?’

‘I dare not, Nell. It is growing blacker every minute, and the snow deeper. I dare not let you.’

‘I am afraid we shall never get home,’ she said wearily. ‘Do you think we shall be lost?’ And she looked into his eyes sadly. ‘It would be hard, just when we had found each other at last, wouldn’t it?’

‘It shan’t be!’ he said fiercely. ‘Put your arms round my neck, Nell. So—close! I shall carry you.’

‘Oh, Barrington, you will never carry me all the way down. If you were alone you could save yourself, but now I shall perhaps lose you too!’

‘I shall carry you all the way down,’ he said between his teeth, as the snow flew in his face, blinding his eyes and pricking his skin like needle points.

He paused a moment.

‘Waif, old fellow!’

Waif stood looking up eagerly into his face.

‘Waif, go on—go on and fetch them up! Quick! hasten on, good dog! bring them back with you!’

Not one instant did Waif hesitate. The steps which he had been accommodating to the slower pace of his human companions now went like the wind, and he was out of sight in a moment, his light feet bearing him safely over places where his master would have sunk in deeply, or been in peril of a dangerous fall.

Meanwhile the wind was rising, and the air each moment grew more icy cold.

‘Put your face down, my darling,’ he whispered ; ‘shelter it behind my head.’

And with her warm breath upon his neck he struggled on, bearing his burden bravely, thanking God for his strong arms. He had always been a muscular man. But had there not been a ‘soul of good in things evil,’ in the increased development of bone and sinew by the daily toil in those cruel Portland stone-quarries ?

CHAPTER XVI.

‘SHE SHALL NOT DIE. LOOK UP, MY
QUEEN !’

‘No joy so great but runneth to an end,
No hap so hard but may in time amend ;
Not always fall of leaf, nor ever spring,
Not endless night, nor yet eternal day ;
The saddest birds a season find to sing,
The roughest storm a calm may soon allay.
Thus with succeeding turns God tempereth all,
That man may hope to rise, yet fear to fall.’

ROBT. SOUTHWELL.

THE next morning De Witt rose after a sleepless night. Had he done wrong in breaking his resolution ? Was it selfish to give way to the generous pleadings of the girl he loved ? Should he all his life long be pursued by a vain regret that he had

been weak enough to listen to her voice, instead of following that first decision, which had been the result of anxious and careful deliberation? Was that decision of his, as Judith last night in their short, agitated interview had seemed to imply, one Quixotic and over-scrupulous, nay cruel? or was it indeed the only course for an honourable man to pursue? He felt himself unable to decide; and since fate and Nell herself had decided it for him, why should he grudge himself his great happiness, or mar it by imagining future drawbacks?

It was too early as yet to go round to her hotel, much as he longed to know if she had escaped without serious harm from last night's bitter cold and exposure. So he wandered down-stairs towards the dining-room and ordered his coffee. He sat down beside the door which led into the

well-warmed hall, the only occupant of the long bare room. Presently, however, his attention was attracted by the voices of two Englishmen outside. They were leaving by the morning's express to Bâle ; and as they stood below, waiting for their luggage, they conversed together of De Witt's adventure of last night, which, through some means or other, had got about, and was the subject of much gossip in both hotels.

‘Most romantic rescue!’ remarked one. ‘Such an odd fellow. Never goes into the smoking-room when other fellows are there, and scarcely ever opens his lips.’

‘They say there's a reason for that—that his name isn't Watson at all, and that he's a shady sort of chap—got mixed up in some mess or other in England, and had to cut and run for it.’

‘Pleasant for the girl in that case ! And

I hear she's an heiress. He'll try to run off with her on the strength of picking her out of the snow.'

'Of course he will.'

The omnibus was rattling up to the hall door, the porters were running down-stairs with the portmanteaux, and the two well-dressed, gentlemanly, good-natured young Englishmen dipped their hands into their pockets, and with a last fee to the boots and a nod to the smiling hotel-keeper, passed out into the cold, raw, early morning; whilst Barrington finished his breakfast, as he had begun it, alone. Every one was late that dark, grey, chilly day except the two Oxonians, and the man on whose private history they had descanted so pleasantly and so veraciously.

'And this is what *she* will have to put up with!' he said to himself, as he rose from

his hardly-tasted breakfast. ‘And how much harder it will be for her to bear than for me.’

He walked towards the windows. It was not an inviting day. But he called the waiter, and telling him he should not be in to lunch, put on a light overcoat and started for a long walk. It was better not to face Nell with these feelings in his heart ; it was better to wait until he could come before her with a countenance and mind forgetful of such poisonous thoughts. She probably would be too tired to receive him early ; he would return before afternoon, and go to her hotel. And by degrees, as he walked on, the shadows faded from his mind, and the consciousness of her love deepened and spread about it with a soothing warmth ; he grew more than cheerful—he felt happy, and thanked God for his

happiness, walking quicker and quicker over the snowy roads. After all, what mattered the slander or detraction of a few strangers? All who knew him knew also of his innocence; the depressing effect of prison life and confinement had made him over-sensitive, mawkish.

The day grew gloomier, and the slow snow-flakes began to fall, but he took each step more lightly, thinking of the bright spot in his life—the deep, pure woman-love that had more than once saved him on the brink of despair, that was stronger than death itself. Yes; he would remember only that. Why should he recall the past, to his misery, if she, sweet soul, could forget it?

The snow-flakes fell faster, the sky grew murkier; but he hurried on, enjoying the cold in his strong youth. He would not return on foot; he would walk to the rail-

way station of L—— and come back by train. That would bring him into Lucerne by noon—as soon probably as Nell would be able to receive him.

But he forgot to take the elements into consideration in his calculations. L—— reached, the train started indeed, going slowly on account of the snow; but it never reached Lucerne that night or the next day. About a quarter of an hour after De Witt had entered it, it ran into a snow-drift, where not only it but the few passengers were forced to remain for the next twenty-four hours. There were some provisions amongst the travellers, and more than one brandy-flask, so the horrors of starvation were avoided; but it was not an agreeable time to any one. Not one, however, perhaps had such reason to curse his or her ill-luck as De Witt, frantic at the thought of the anxiety, the fears which

his absence would occasion Nell. Fortunate for him that he did not picture to himself the full horror of the truth—that he could not see what was passing in the little room where the sick girl lay.

She had been put to bed that first night by Judith's tender hands in a state of drowsy half-consciousness, which might mean simply over-exhaustion, or portend some more serious result from the exposure she had undergone—the doctor who lived in the house, and was called in to see her, hoped it was the former. But in the middle of the night, fever and ague set in violently, and the morning found her utterly exhausted and powerless. Yet amid all her pain and weakness the new look of serenity never left the girl's eyes, and she smiled up into Judith's face with a smile of perfect contentment.

‘Don't pity me *now*,’ she whispered, as

the day dawned, and a compassionate word happened to fall from her companion’s lips. ‘What does it matter if I do cough a little? Oh, Judith, I am so happy!’

But as the morning advanced, her features began to take a watchful, then an anxious look.

‘Do you think he will come soon?’ she asked. ‘Let me get up and go upon the sofa. I can see him here for a few minutes, can’t I, Judith?’

Even the rising and partial dressing seemed too much for her; but her friend had not the heart to deny her what she wished.

‘Judith,’ she said, with a forced calm, once more, as the day wore on, ‘why doesn’t he come? Perhaps he is ill. May we send and see?’

Judith’s answer was to put on her hat and walk down to the neighbouring hotel.

Nell’s white drawn face of suspense when

she returned was terrible to see. She could not speak.

‘He is gone out, dear, for a walk,’ said Mrs. Ponsonby, terror in her heart, but disguising it as best she could from the girl before her. ‘He will be back soon, and then he will come and see you.’

‘Did they say so?’ asked Nell with parched lips.

‘They didn’t say so, dear, but he is sure to do it,’ answered Judith, with a pitiful cheerfulness.

Did Barrington know what he was doing? If he left her now, assuredly Nell’s death would lie at his door.

‘Judith, Judith, are you sure he will? You don’t think he is gone away—that he will go from me again?’

A terrible trembling had taken hold of all her limbs, and Judith put her arms around her.

‘No, my darling, no! Don’t imagine such a thing.’

The hours were horrible as they passed on slowly, slowly, till the dimness of early dusk began to fall upon the little room, and the two women sat looking at each other.

Then Nell spoke again in a hoarse whisper.

‘Oh, Judith, send again! Send to ask if he has come back!’

And again Judith went out on the errand she would not intrust to a servant; and again returned answerless and hopeless.

‘He will not come now—he is gone!’ said the sick girl slowly; and the settled despair of her voice was terrible to her companion.

She did not speak of him again, and made no resistance after a time to Judith’s wish that she should exchange the couch for her bed. She grew weaker and weaker, and all the restoratives administered to

her proved unavailing. All night long the fever returned, accompanied in turns by unconsciousness and partial delirium; and in the morning she lay without speech or movement, her face white as the pillow on which it rested—whether conscious or unconscious they could not tell, but apparently deaf and blind to the outside world.

‘She is dying!’ said Judith to the medical man, as she finished telling him in short outlines poor Nell’s sad history.

‘She is not dying,’ he said thoughtfully; ‘but she is in imminent danger, unless we can rouse her from her present condition.’

‘Nothing will do that except Barrington’s return!’ replied Mrs. Ponsonby with streaming eyes.

‘Has she a mother living?’

‘Oh, yes; in England.’

‘Then you had better telegraph to her at once. Go on with the stimulants. If

you can see any way of rousing her, do so. I will return in an hour.’

But in less than an hour a tap came to the bed-room door, and Judith moved away from the bed-side, where Nell’s face lay stiller, whiter, it seemed to her, with every moment that passed. The chamber-maid, speaking in French, pointed below; and glancing down quickly, Judith saw Barrington standing on the landing half-way up the stairs. In a moment she was beside him.

‘Is she ill?’ he asked, out of breath.

‘She is dying,’ said Judith; ‘you have killed her, Barrington!’

She had never in her life spoken harshly to him before. Now in a moment she repented of her cruel words, for his face turned ghastly, and he staggered against the wall as if he had been struck.

‘I did not mean it!’ she exclaimed hastily. ‘She may recover yet; but she is

very ill. Oh, Barrington, why did you not come all yesterday ?’

‘I could not,’ he said ; ‘I was in the train—we were snowed up—I have only just got in—’

‘I knew you could not mean it. Oh, forgive me, Barrington ! Your coming may save her.’

‘May I see her ?’ he asked huskily, as she beckoned him to follow her up the stairs.

‘I will see—I think so. Wait here.’

Leaving him standing outside in the corridor, she opened the door and went in softly. Still the same colourless face, the same closed eyes, the same motionless form. Had he come too late to rouse her from this death-like apathy ?

Approaching the bed, she bent down so that her lips were close to the white features, and for a moment her heart stood still, unable to hear the faint breathing.

The next she called in a low, clear tone :
 ‘Nell ! Nell ! do you hear me ?’

No answer. Not even a flutter of the blue-veined eyelids.

‘Nell !’ she called again, and her voice was full of anguish. ‘Oh, Nell, hear me ! Barrington is here—he is come back !’

Still no life or movement about the pallid features, no stirring of the quiet limbs. Nell must be lost indeed to consciousness before that loved name would fail to rouse her.

Then Judith opened the door quickly and beckoned him in.

‘She does not hear—she does not understand. See if your voice will rouse her. It is the last chance. Oh, Barrington, keep your self-control—for her sake !’

For, at sight of the poor pale face that had always been so full of life and love to him, lying in that sightless, soundless

trance, a sudden sob had burst from his lips. He did not need her warning. He was calm again, though all the colour had left his face, as he bent over the unconscious girl.

‘Nell!’ he said, in a voice unlike his own, ‘Nell, my darling—speak to me—look up!’

She stirred a little, and he went on more passionately, putting his arm about her shoulders, so as to raise the drooping head somewhat, and pressing his lips to her cold white forehead.

‘Nell, little Nell—look up, my queen!’

Was it the sound of the old name by which he, and he alone, had called her in the old happy days, that now aroused her torpid senses?

At any rate her eyes unclosed, and rested upon his face. And by degrees a kind of rapture came into them. She did not speak,

but the long sigh she drew was one of contentment not of exhaustion. And presently, still silent, she smiled up at him.

He had brought her back from the valley of the shadow of death, when her feet were already set upon the darkening path. Not to many of us is it so given to rescue to renewed life those we love.

When the doctor came in soon after she was still lying in his arms, her head upon his breast, her hand in his. Barrington did not move at his entrance; his whole attention seemed concentrated on the burden he held so tenderly; but the eyes he turned upon the medical man after he had felt the pulse of the patient, were full of the agony of entreaty.

‘This is a wonderful rally,’ said the doctor quietly. ‘I presume, Mrs. Ponsonby, we have got the right stimulant at last?’

He spoke gravely, and the gaze which

rested upon the young man was serious and critical, but by no means unfriendly.

‘Yes,’ he said, answering the looks rather than the words of the girl’s two companions, ‘I think she will do now, if things go on as they are. You may continue—the stimulant—at intervals.’ And somehow, as the good man got up from his chair, he had to take his spectacles off and wipe them—the glasses had become so dim.

‘Barrington,’ whispered Nell, as Judith followed Dr. Kennedy out of the room, and for a moment they were left alone, ‘does he say I shall recover?’

‘Oh, my darling, you must, you will! I cannot do without you, Nell!’

‘I think I shall, Barrington—now you have come back. I am only weak now.’

‘I never meant to leave you, Nell; I was prevented returning.’

‘You will never leave me again, Barrington? You will never think it best for me that you should go away, will you?’

‘Never, never, my darling!’

He could no longer control himself, and laying his head upon the coverlet, he sobbed aloud.

She put up her weak arms, and tried to draw him closer to her.

‘Don’t cry, dear, dear Barrington. How foolish and wrong I was to think you ever meant to leave me yesterday. It was wicked of me to doubt you—I won’t do it again.’

He raised his face, checking his agitation with an effort.

‘I will never leave you again, Nell—by my own will—till we are married—never for a day!’

She smiled her old playful smile.

‘That must be very soon, darling. I

want to have you fast. You mustn't escape me again. Oh, Barrington, did you ever love me as I love you, I wonder?'

'I loved you so much, Nell, that I was willing to give you up—though it broke my heart—to save you misery.'

'To save me misery!' she repeated slowly. 'You made a mistake, Barrington. Why, dear, I couldn't live without you. You know it now, don't you?'

'With all my knowledge of you and my love for you, my queen, I never knew it as I do now.'

And then a silence, full of sweet eloquence, fell between them, and she closed her eyes in a perfect rest.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONTAINING THREE LETTERS AND A MORAL.

‘Forgiveness to the injured does belong ;
But they ne’er pardon who have done the wrong.’
DRYDEN.

‘Lucerne. Dec. 24th.

‘MY DEAREST JOHN,

‘What will you say ? Nell and Barrington are engaged to each other ! They both got lost in the snow, and Nell has been at death’s door. She is recovering fast now ; but Mrs. Brereton, who was telegraphed for, may turn up at any moment. I have such oceans to tell you, and not a moment to tell it in ; so I will post this now, and write again to-morrow.

‘Your loving wife,

‘JUDITH.

‘P.S. What *will* old Brereton say to us? And only fancy, if he should come out here! But it won’t make any difference to Nell. Take care of yourself, dear John, and tell me in your next that you miss me very much. Oh, they are both so happy, John. It almost makes me cry for joy to watch them!’

‘*Killymore Towers. Dec. 26th.*

‘MY DEAREST JUDY,

‘You are a little fool, and Nell and Barrington are a brace of ditto; and I am the biggest fool of all for letting you wander about the world by yourself. You had better return home at once before you perpetrate any more romantic follies. I will run over to Paris and meet you any day you name. Good-bye, my darling.

‘Your loving

‘JOHN.

‘P.S. Old B—— may go to the d— for anything I care! Give my love to the other couple of fools.’

‘*Lucerne. Dec. 28th.*

‘DARLING JOHN,

‘What a nice old boy you are ! I think I may as well return the day after to-morrow, as Mrs. Brereton is here now, and I am wanted no longer to do duty as chaperone. It is so absurd,—she hadn’t been an hour in the house before she was completely won over by Barrington, and now she calls him, to Nell and me, “poor dear fellow,” and shudders at the “cruel and shameful way” in which he has been treated ! *She* will never oppose their marriage ; and her husband’s authority is nil in another month. Good-bye, darling. Oh, how glad I am to be coming home again ! John, I doubt if I ever thoroughly realized before what an unselfish woman you had married in your loving

‘JUDITH.

‘P.S. It’s not right, but it’s very sweet of you to send old B—— to the d— !’

* * * * *

‘How I wish, Edward,’ said Mrs. Brereton to her spouse, six months later, ‘that you would pay them a visit. I had no idea Barrington’s was such a pretty place; and he and Nell seem such favourites with all the people round. It is quite beautiful to be with a young couple so devotedly attached to one another as they are. Dear Barrington is growing quite his old bright self again. You could not help loving him if you saw, as I have done, how happy he makes her.’

‘I don’t want to love him,’ growled Mr. Brereton, as he turned away sulkily.

THE END.

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